THE TRIGGER OF CONSCIENCE

BY
ROBERT ORR SEPTIMUS

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ROBERT ORR CHIPPERFIELD

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BY

ROBERT ORR CHIPPERFIELD

Author of "The Second Bullet," "Unseen Hands," etc.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Mr. Grant Invites Criticism . .	1
II	The Hornet's Nest	18
III	Under the Dragon Lantern . .	33
IV	The Glistening Strand . . .	52
V	Renwick Crane Arrives . . .	64
VI	"More Than One"	83
VII	The Man in the Bushes . . .	99
VIII	In the Boxwood Bushes . . .	115
IX	The Curiosity of Mrs. Sowerby .	132
X	The Woman Upstairs	148
XI	The Shot from the Air . . .	161
XII	"I Killed Him"	183
XIII	The Driver of Death	200
XIV	Telltale Numerals	214
XV	Mrs. Dorrance Advances a Theory	232
XVI	A Piece of Ribbon	249
XVII	The Shadow on the Door . . .	265
XVIII	The Rose-Leaf Ear	280
XIX	"The Triangle Turn"	299

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THE TRIGGER OF CONSCIENCE

CHAPTER I

MR. GRANT INVITES CRITICISM

THE golf course of the Broadlawns Country Club lay basking in the mellow sunshine of a late September afternoon. Vivid coats and sweaters made bright splashes of color, and the striped awning of the marquee upon the lawn challenged the eye as defiantly as at the commencement of the season. But the stout, white-haired old gentleman on the veranda shivered and tugged at the collar of his too youthful sport coat.

"Hello, Sowerby! Been around to-day?" A cold, rather gibing voice sounded just behind him, and President Sowerby of the Tradesmen's Bank turned irascibly in his chair, and the gaitered foot, which had rested carefully upon the veranda rail, slipped to the floor.

Just behind him stood a handsome man of about forty. The telltale lines about his shrewd eyes and the curious patch, like a white postage stamp,

in the dark hair above each ear, only added to an engaging countenance.

"Confound you, Bowles!" Rutherford Sowerby exclaimed as he recognized the newcomer. "Why do you sneak up on those rubber soles of yours like a stage detective?"

He paused with a snort, and the other, in the freedom of old acquaintanceship, laughed and perched himself on the veranda rail. "Sorry I startled you. Little touch of the gout to-day?" he asked with half-bantering sympathy.

"No, it isn't!" the old gentleman lied bravely. "I'm waiting for my wife; never knew a woman to be on time yet! How was the market? I didn't run into town this morning."

"Pretty steady," the broker responded absently, his eyes upon two figures, which, unseen by his older companion, had started around the corner of the veranda. One was a young woman not yet out of her twenties, pretty in a fluffy, colorless, rather insipid fashion, and the other was a slightly older man with a dapper little blond mustache and prominent light blue eyes.

The couple halted instantly, and the woman flushed and made a slight, almost imperceptible motion of dismissal. Her companion, accepting his dismissal, disappeared around the corner of

the veranda, and she came forward biting her full lips. Bowles, the broker, smiled inwardly at the incident. The woman was Sowerby's young wife, and Philip Dorrance, treasurer—popularly known as "husband"—of the Farr Rubber Company, had been her companion. Ogden Bowles raised his voice slightly and added in his bantering tone: "There wasn't much movement on the Exchange, but rubber seems to be booming. Good afternoon, Mrs. Sowerby!" He rose, and young Mrs. Sowerby flushed—as he had meant that she should—and darted a venomous glance at him.

"Good afternoon," she replied sweetly. "Have you met the new secretary of the club—the one whom the committee engaged to succeed poor Mr. Martin? Mrs. Carter says he is rather a grouch, but I believe he refused to advance her any money this afternoon to pay her bridge debt. He told her that her account on the books was already quite heavy for this month, and, being a new man, he couldn't take the responsibility without consulting the secretary of the club, Mr. Estridge." She smiled and turned to her husband. "Have I kept you waiting, dear? I stopped for a minute to speak to the Frasers and Mr. Dorrance. They were watching Gerald Landon and Miss Dare finish their round."

Bowles' face had darkened for an instant at her thrust at Mrs. Carter. Ignoring her remark about the secretary, he repeated, as he prepared to depart: "Gerald Landon? That young friend of the Frasers? I hope he shows up well later in the tournament, for he's made the only decent scores here this season. By the way, I understand he is the assistant cashier at your bank, Sowerby? What we need here is young blood to put some pep into the game. I am sure a golf enthusiast like yourself will agree with me. Please save me a fox trot at the dance to-night, Mrs. Sowerby."

As the broker moved away Sowerby thundered at his wife. "What we need is less of his cool impudence around here," he said. "What business is it of his how enthusiastic I am about his infernal golf, and what business have you to interest yourself in that Carter woman's debts?"

"Just—because," Maud Sowerby responded.

"Gad, it's the sort of thing a man wouldn't have mentioned! Commend me to women for making a country club a hotbed of knocking and backbiting and general cattishness!" Her husband stamped his gouty foot and then swore vigorously, but her equanimity was not disturbed.

"Go on, dear! You've called me the name of about every other animal in the menagerie, so I may as well be a cat, too," she observed.

His fat face flamed in mounting, apoplectic rage. "Cats aren't in menageries! They're in back alleys like the one you came from!" he exclaimed. "Stop that infernal tapping on the rail with your fingers. You're no longer at the typewriter where I found you when I was fool enough to marry you!"

Maud Sowerby's breath drew in with a little venomous hiss, but the nervous tapping of her fingers ceased obediently. She was as much ashamed of those stubby, thickened fingers as of the plebeian origin with which the irascible old man always taunted her when his gout got the better of him. The next moment she rose lightly from the low wicker chair.

"I think I'll join the Frasers." In spite of herself a little sharp note had crept into her tones. "This constant washing of dirty linen in public, my dear Rutherford, really ought to be confined to back yards where alley cats congregate!"

As she left him the old man chuckled in vicious glee. He was still chuckling when a tall, slender,

distinguished-looking, gray-haired man of fifty, after a word or two with the club steward in the doorway, approached him.

"Hello, Rutherford! Have you met the new secretary of the club?" His voice, though confidentially modulated, was suave and resonant with the notes of a trained orator, and the smile, with which he met the eyes of the bank president, was the diplomatic one which had overcome the prejudices of more than one difficult jury in a celebrated case.

Rutherford Sowerby grunted. " 'Lo, Sam! What's all this about your infernal secretary? Haven't I always maintained that this club was too small to need a salaried one? Aren't you the official, duly elected officer in that capacity? I never did see why the steward couldn't keep the tuppenny monthly accounts and bring them to you to be ratified without any intermediary."

"Yet you were one of the directors at the last meeting who instructed the chairman of the house committee to ask me to find a man for you." Samuel Estridge's tone seemed not to have changed, but it held a quality which made the older man eye him more keenly. "I think you'd better come along and have a look at him."

Without another word Sowerby hauled himself

out of his chair, and the two strolled into the clubhouse. They proceeded at once to the secretary's office on the other side of the staircase from that of the steward.

Here they found a stocky man of indeterminate middle age, with a shock of sandy hair as heavy as a wig and thick-rimmed glasses beneath his eye-shade, poring nearsightedly over a ledger behind the desk. In front of it stood a stout, majestic, elderly woman with a high, bony nose and piercing dark eyes that glared across the counter through a short-handled, diamond-studded lorgnette.

"I am positive that there is some mistake!" she was saying in frigid, dominant tones. Then, as she caught sight of the newcomers, she turned to the lawyer. "Mr. Estridge, I really think that Mr. Martin, no matter how ill he was before he went West, ought to have gone more thoroughly over the books with your new Mr. Grant here. I am certain that my personal account is incorrect, and, although I do not wish to go so far as to lay it before the board—"

"My dear Mrs. de Forest, this is Mr. Grant's first day in active charge, you know." The lawyer's voice was as winning as his smile. "I promise you that I will give him my personal assistance

and look into this matter at the earliest possible opportunity."

Cutting short the lady's effusive declaration that she would not dream of troubling him and had no doubt that the trifling affair would adjust itself, he led her adroitly into a discussion of the afternoon's bridge game. Presently the dapper, blond, young Mr. Dorrance appeared in the doorway and, with the conciliatory little cough he usually reserved solely for addressing his own wife, announced: "Mrs. de Forest, I have been looking everywhere for you! Josephine and the Frasers are waiting tea, and they wouldn't dream——"

The social arbiter of Broadlawns smiled graciously. "Of course! I'll join them at once. How stupid of me!" With an inclination of her elaborately coiffured gray head to the others she departed in his company much after the manner of a huge liner with a fussy little tug. Sowerby growled in an aside to the lawyer: "Wish she would lay something before the board, as she's always threatening to do, while I'm present at the meeting! What I'd do to it—— But your man here does seem to be—er—going a bit farther than Martin. I hear he disputed Mrs. Carter's credit."

The shock of sandy hair had not raised itself an inch from above the ledger, and Estridge stepped quickly forward as though he, too, had not heard his companion's remark.

"Getting on to the work all right, Grant? Mr. Sowerby, this is Mr. James Grant, who will look after the books for us in place of Mr. Martin. Grant, this is Mr. Rutherford Sowerby, president of the Tradesmen's Bank in New York and one of the directors of the club."

The new secretary of the club acknowledged the introduction with just the right shade of deference and then replied to the lawyer's question: "Yes, sir, I think I shall get on to the work in time quite satisfactorily. Murdock has been assisting me to-day in his spare time."

"'Murdock?' Yes, I'm sure you'll find the steward very helpful, and there is no reason why you shouldn't delegate a lot of the minor accounts to him, Mr. Grant." Samuel Estridge turned away. "You needn't stay cooped up in here all the time, you know. Come on, Rutherford, I've got something better than tea in my locker!"

Young Mrs. Sowerby appeared in the door of the office. "Rutherford, the car's waiting, and you know you ordered it for five o'clock." She spoke hurriedly, and her eyes shifted as though,

strangely enough, she were trying to avoid meeting the gaze of the man behind the desk. "How do you do, Mr. Estridge? May we drop you at your place on our way home?"

"Thanks, I'm staying on here a little longer. Have you met our new house secretary, Mr. Grant?" Estridge was watching her curiously, and he noted the quick, uncontrollable flush which mounted in her face.

"Yes, I—I've met Mr. Grant." Her eyelids fluttered and fell, and then she turned quickly to her husband. "Rutherford, Whitcomb says that the batteries——"

With feline cleverness she had scratched upon a spot already sore. "Whitcomb's a fool!" Sowerby charged for the door. "See you to-night, Sam. This is your fool nonsense, Maud, in wanting a bullheaded British driver because he looked swagger. Swagger, my eye! Now he wants the earth! Don't I know the batteries of that car?"

His voice died away upon the veranda, and Estridge turned with a little shrug to the new secretary, but that worthy had bent once more over his ledger, and the lawyer strolled out.

In the rotundalike entrance hall, where, as upon the veranda, cozy little groups were having tea,

he came upon Ogden Bowles deep in conversation with a tall, willowy woman, whose rich red hair was drawn down over her ears like a Madonna by Raphael. He would have passed them with a smiling nod, but the broker stopped him.

"I say, Estridge, do sit down for a minute and amuse Mrs. Carter. I've got to see the secretary, and I am afraid she will run away from me! I have been trying to persuade her to dine with the Dorrances and me at the Mayblossom Inn—I'd ask you, too, but I know that you are booked already, unfortunately—and I'm not having any luck."

"Don't try to amuse me, Mr. Estridge—all the men do that—but take this chair by me and satisfy my feminine and trivial curiosity." Mrs. Carter had large eyes of a peculiar golden brown, and she knew how to use them. There was nothing for the attorney to do but to acquiesce, and he dropped into the chair indicated, as Bowles bowed and turned toward the little office.

"Anything that interested you sufficiently to arouse your curiosity could not be trivial, Mrs. Carter," he murmured mechanically.

"That isn't worthy of you, Mr. Estridge," she replied. "One might expect that sort of thing from Phil Dorrance, perhaps, if his wife were

not within hearing, but not from our most noted criminal lawyer."

" 'Criminal lawyer' sounds ambiguous, doesn't it?" he said. "But, seriously, you have aroused my curiosity by declaring that you have any. I have always looked upon you as one woman devoid of it."

"It isn't very active." As she spoke Mrs. Carter's glinting, topaz eyes shifted from him to the tiny office at the right of the broad staircase. "Tell me something about the club's new secretary—Mr. Grant, isn't it? He seems to be rather an unusual individual, not quite like a mere clerk."

"He isn't." The attorney spoke easily enough, and his tone had sunk to an even more conversational level, but he eyed Mrs. Carter's profile, clean cut against her banded, straight red hair, with a shrewd glimmer of speculation. "I believe he held a more superior position of some sort, but he has accepted this until Martin's return because he is so keen on golf. He won't be tied down to the office since Murdock can do a lot of his work. You've met him? I hope he hasn't been officious about the accounts or anything? These men who feel superior to their positions so often are dictatorial."

Mrs. Carter laughed lightly, and one of her long, slim, very white hands gripped the chair arm until the wicker creaked. "Oh, dear, no! I never bother about my club accounts except to write a check for the total at the first of the month without even glancing over my slips. I'm such a bad business woman! But, when I went in to ask this Mr. Grant some trivial question or other, a little while ago, he seemed to mistake me for some one else and was so politely incredulous about it that it rather amused me. I'm sure I never laid eyes on the man before, unless he has waited upon me in some shop or bank. What did you say his position was previous to his coming here, Mr. Estridge?"

Her tone was a bored, idle one, but, as she moved again restlessly in her chair, the attorney caught another glimpse of her eyes, and their eager, almost defensive, light did not accord with her manner. Was it fear that he read in them—the same fear which had covered the less well-poised little Mrs. Sowerby with confusion?

"I didn't say, but I'm quite sure he has never waited upon any one in his life," Estridge replied deliberately. "I understand he was the confidential secretary for some very noted personage."

"For whom?" A crisp voice behind him made

him glance over his shoulder to see that Ogden Bowles had returned. In the usually debonair broker, too, there appeared a slight, but significant, change. The fine lines about his eyes seemed to have deepened, and his lips were set. "Who is this fellow, Grant, Estridge? You'll forgive me for overhearing a part of your conversation, but it was unavoidable. The man seems rather a dub to me."

"Oh, give him time, Bowles; this is his first day, you know." The attorney laughed good-naturedly, but in his mind a curious question was forming. "I don't know for whom the chap was confidential secretary, but if you're interested I don't doubt that I can find out from the house committee."

"I'm not sufficiently interested for that, thanks." Bowles laughed also, but rather shortly. "Mrs. Carter, is it to be the Mayblossom Inn?"

She rose with a slow shake of her head. "So sorry, but I find that I have a slight headache, and, if I am to return for the dance to-night, I must rest. I'll let you run me home to my little cottage, though, if you like."

After a final word or two with Estridge the couple moved off down the veranda steps, and the

attorney sank back in the chair from which he had just arisen, but he turned it so as to face the door of the little office in which the new secretary had been installed. What was the matter with Mrs. Sowerby and Mrs. Carter and Bowles? Could it be his own imagination, could his nerves have gone back on him after that last big, grueling contest of wits in court, or was there really something strange and sinister underlying the tranquil surface atmosphere of this little club of suburban acquaintances—greater even than he had conceived in his knowledge of their petty affairs?

While he sat there lost in reverie Murdock, the steward, approached. He was a man of forty-odd with a slight touch of gray at his temples and the expressionless face of the perfectly trained servant. Absently Estridge ordered a lemonade. When the man brought it he remarked: "Murdock, Mr. Grant says that you have been helping him to-day with the accounts which Mr. Martin left unfinished."

Murdock coughed. "Well, yes, sir," he murmured. "Having a little spare time and knowing the books from going over them with Mr. Martin, I thought it was what the house committee would wish, sir."

His tone was apologetic, as though feeling that he had overstepped the bounds of his appointed duty, but Samuel Estridge nodded approvingly. "Quite right, Murdock. Take as much off Mr. Grant's hands as you can, especially at first. You know the books, and of course they've been kept absolutely straight."

"Of course, sir." Murdock placed the empty glass upon his tray and started to move off. The attorney stopped him once more and spoke in a lowered tone:

"Murdock, you've been a trusted employee of Broadlawns since it was built, and, if anything goes on at any time that strikes you as being—er—not quite regular, I shall appreciate your coming to me, as secretary, instead of first reporting the matter to the house committee, you understand?"

Murdock's face remained expressionless, but he responded with a shade more emphasis: "Perfectly, sir. I have heard of nothing irregular, and I am quite sure that there will be no difficulty about the books. Thank you, sir."

This time he departed without further comment or instruction, but when he had disappeared Estridge glanced once more through the doorway

into the office of the new secretary. The shock of sandy hair had been raised for an instant from above the ledger, and from behind a pair of heavy-rimmed glasses two shadowed, unexpectedly keen eyes seemed staring into his own.

CHAPTER II

THE HORNET'S NEST

SEPTEMBER had vanished in a burst of springlike warmth. October ushered in a period of premature, nipping frost which drove all but the hardiest of the golf players from the course and speedily turned the leaves of the trees about the clubhouse to the evanescent scarlet and gold of autumn.

The veranda was now practically deserted. Those of the all-year colony, who still forgathered at Broadlawns for tea and afternoon bridge, preferred the spacious entrance hall and dining room —the latter in reality a converted sun parlor. It was here that two feminine members of the club were lunching together one glowing day late in the month.

"This salad is atrocious!" The larger, more elderly of the two ladies shook her elaborately dressed gray head indignantly. "I am really tempted to lay the matter of the cuisine before

the board! As it is I would have invited you to lunch at the house, Mrs. Dorrance, but I fancied we might pick up two people here for bridge later. Besides I am breaking in a new cook. You know what that means!"

"Indeed I do, my dear Mrs. de Forest!" the other replied. She was dark and beetle-browed, and an undeniable shadow appeared upon her firm upper lip. A tendency to embonpoint she curbed with obviously Spartan courage. Her one known act of self-indulgence had been her marriage to good-looking, penniless, weak Phil Dorrance, twelve years her junior. She had made him treasurer of the great Farr Rubber Company, and, although men looked with contempt upon him for the transaction, it was mingled with pity. For the "Empress Josephine," as all Broadlawns called her behind her arrogant back, was no easy task-mistress. "Our own cook left this morning, but Philip is bringing another out from town with him this afternoon."

"I thought he was playing off his match with Ogden Bowles to-day," Mrs. de Forest observed.

"No. I sent him in to Harlier's with my emeralds; it occurred to me that I had better have the settings looked over before the Hallowe'en dance to-morrow night." Josephine Dorrance

eyed her peach Melba and then pushed it resolutely from her. "You will wear your diamond necklace, of course?"

Mrs. de Forest shook her head, and her lips tightened. "No. With so many nouveau riche members coming into the club I decided that such a display, at a mere informal Hallowe'en affair, would be not only vulgar, but a bad example for Alice. Girls—especially those with no money of their own—do get such silly notions and expectations! You've no idea what it is to have a penniless, spoiled orphan niece on your hands!" Mrs. de Forest sighed. "I had hoped that Alice would be quite a help to me—a sort of social secretary, you know—but my poor sister-in-law indulged her so, and on positively nothing, my dear, that Alice takes everything quite for granted!"

The Farr rubber fortune was newer by two generations than the de Forest wealth, and Mrs. Dorrance quite enjoyed the sensation her emeralds always created at the club, especially among the lately admitted members. Therefore she raised her heavy brows slightly as she replied: "I don't believe you will be troubled with Miss Dare very long. That nice Landon boy who is visiting the Frasers——"

"A mere bank employee of Rutherford Sower-

by's!" Mrs. de Forest exclaimed. "I have forbidden Alice to have anything more to do with him than sheer courtesy demands. After all she is my niece, and I do not approve of even a wealthy, mature woman marrying an indigent upstart, much less an impressionable girl like Alice with her future before her. She will keep Gerald Landon in his place." With this Parthian shot Mrs. de Forest led the way from the dining room.

At that very moment Alice Dare was having considerably more to do with the Landon boy than sheer courtesy demanded. As a matter of fact, she was seriously interfering with his driving of the Frasers' little runabout by cuddling her head into his shoulder, and Gerald Landon did not seem to object in the least. They were on a secluded road several miles from Broadlawns, making rapidly for a little, old-fashioned village and a certain little old-fashioned cottage on its main street.

All at once Alice straightened in her seat and asked for the twentieth time: "Oh, do you think it will be all right, Gerald, darling?"

"Right as rain!" he responded promptly, avoiding a rut in the road by the narrowest margin.

"I don't know!" Alice replied. "There's just one person in that club whom I'll be afraid to face, and that person is the secretary. There's some-

thing odd about him, Gerald; I don't know whether it's that shaggy mop of hair that he peers out from beneath when he asks one of those funny, unexpected questions, or the way he stares after one. He's not disrespectful at all, nor even personal, and I can't say that I dislike him; he simply makes me uncomfortable. I wish I could see his eyes without that shade or those heavy-rimmed glasses."

"Oh, he's just an old codger who has been in a rut always, dear, and country-club life is all new to him," Gerald replied. "Jack Fraser seems to think he is clever."

"So does Mr. Estridge and—and Mr. Sowerby," Alice said in a lowered tone. "I've seen them talking to him a lot."

"Well, I'm safe enough even if Sowerby has taken a queer fancy to him," Gerald observed. "I'm not a member, you know, just a guest of the Frasers, and Grant only bothers with his club accounts and ledgers. Not a single one of the crowd will see us until we get back."

But the young assistant cashier of Sowerby's bank was wrong. The solitary occupant of a big, high-powered car, coming down one of the side roads, had noted and recognized the couple in the

little runabout, and he gazed after them speculatively as he swung his own machine back the way they had come, toward Broadlawns. When he neared the club, however, he made a detour down a winding byway that was known as the "Glen Road," and here all thought of the other two was driven from his mind when he came upon a second couple.

These two people were as much engrossed with each other as the first pair had been, and they were equally oblivious to his proximity as he slowed down the car to make as little noise as possible in passing them. They were seated upon a rustic bench half hidden behind a rock; the man wore a dapper town suit and the woman was dressed in a blue sweater and sport skirt. Her ash-blond hair was conspicuously fluffy.

"Fools!" said the occupant of the big car as he turned out upon the highway again and headed for the club. "Fools!"

An hour later Mrs. Jack Fraser emerged from the caddie house and started alone for the club veranda. She was a pretty little woman in the late twenties with a sensible, humorous mouth, healthily tanned skin, and wind-blown brown hair, and she walked with a free, athletic stride devoid

of swagger. As she neared the veranda steps she caught side of Ogden Bowles and hailed him cordially.

"Jack and I have just been around," she said. "It was such a gorgeous afternoon that I couldn't resist it, but I really meant to call on Mrs. Carter. I heard that she had been ill for the last few days, and, as a matter of fact, we've hardly seen her here at the club for the past month."

Ogden Bowles hesitated, eyeing her frank, smiling countenance for a moment as though uncertain what to reply. Then he, too, smiled.

"I am sure that Mrs. Carter's indisposition is not serious. She has promised to come to the Hallowe'en dance with me to-morrow night," he replied. "Won't you come in and let me give you a cup of tea, Mrs. Fraser?"

"You come in and join us," she suggested instead. "All the rest of the crowd are having tea in the foyer."

The atmosphere seemed more chilly indoors than out in the sunshine, and a tiny fire had been started upon the hearth. Rutherford Sowerby had settled himself squarely before it, and Jack Fraser and Samuel Estridge stood with their elbows on the mantel, deep in conversation with him. The attorney appeared to have been remon-

strating, but Sowerby was continuing to speak in a loud voice: "I don't care! I tell you something's got to be done. Here it's been more than a month since the affair happened, and what has been accomplished? Exactly nothing!"

"Look here, Rutherford, unless you want the unholy scandal that we've all been trying to avoid, you'll talk lower!" Estridge spoke in keen, incisive tones with a quick glance toward the bay window where Mrs. Fraser and Ogden Bowles had joined Mrs. de Forest and Mrs. Dorrance, and it was evident that a bridge game was being arranged. "We've taken the only possible step under the circumstances——"

"Well, that step will have to lead somewhere during the next twenty-four hours, Sam, or that unholy scandal you are talking about is likely to spread through all creation!" The bank president's retort was made in a modulated voice. "It happened at the Harvest Dance, if you remember, and to-morrow night is Hallowe'en. If the same thing or something like it occurs then we'll all be in a deuce of a hole!"

"But there are only a few of us who know, and we can all watch," Jack Fraser suggested. He was as tanned and lithe and clear-eyed as his wife, but half a head taller, with a look of strength and

purposefulness that told of a few added years and wider experiences. Just now his jaw was set, and his gray eyes were stern. "Don't think I'm not taking this seriously; the scandal of such a thing may mean mere notoriety for some of us, but actual ruin for the rest, particularly if the matter is never cleared up."

"Cleared up!" exclaimed Sowerby. "It'll be cleared up, by gad, if every member of this club—— Oh, here's my wife!"

But Maud Sowerby, her fluffy, ash-blond hair slightly roughened by the wind, straightened her blue sweater and merely nodded to the group near the fireplace. Joining the others by the bridge table, she rang for the steward.

"I don't believe Murdock's in on the game, but we can't be too careful until we are sure," Jack Fraser spoke in a voice which was scarcely above a whisper as the steward passed with a tea tray. "That's the worst of it! There are perhaps half a dozen of us, including some of the absent house committee, who know what happened, but there's just one member or employee of this club who knows how it happened, and we haven't the slightest clew to his or her identity."

"I should say we had too many!" Estridge said dryly. "I could have named at least three mem-

bers of this club, on the very day that our investigation assumed a practical form, who to the trained eye gave every indication of guilt. Now it is manifestly impossible that they could have been in any conspiracy, and it is equally improbable that any of them had a hand in the affair. We'll have a merry dance to-morrow night if we who know continue to go about glaring at each other."

"It'll be a merrier one if the Harvest affair is repeated!" remarked Sowerby. "Oh, I admit, Sam, that your plan was the only one we could follow under the circumstances, but we might have done ten times more with it as I contended from the beginning."

"And have everybody in the club, members and employees alike, aware of what we were doing?" demanded Estridge. He lowered his arm from the mantel, straightened himself and added irrelevantly: "It is near the first of the month, and Grant must have begun to get his accounts ready to date so that he can add without trouble the little that will come in later. Think I'll go and have a look at them. Hello, Dorrance!"

But Philip Dorrance seemed not to have heard the greeting. He had just entered, clad not in his usual hectic sport regalia, but in one of the dapper

business suits he was in the habit of wearing to the offices of the Farr Rubber Company. His insignificantly good-looking face was curiously white and set as he made his way straight to the bridge table.

Mrs. Dorrance was dummy at the moment, and she glanced up expectantly from her outspread cards. "I thought you might have come out on an earlier train, Philip." Her dominant, almost masculine, tones carried to the farthermost corners of the foyer. "What did Harlier say about my emeralds?"

Dorrance moistened his lips nervously and shook his head. "You won't be able to wear them to-morrow night, my dear Josephine." The reply came with his habitual, conciliatory, little cough. "You were right about the settings; they say at Harlier's that the whole collection must be thoroughly gone over."

With a little exclamation of annoyance Mrs. Dorrance turned her attention once more to the game, and Jack Fraser remarked in an aside to Estridge, who had lingered: "So the Empress Josephine will have to appear without her crowning glory to-morrow night! Perhaps it is just as well. Do you know, I think, if it were not for disappointing my wife, and the fact that my brother

is coming out, I'd stay in town myself and establish a perfectly good, indestructible alibi for the time of this Hallowe'en Dance."

"No, you don't!" declared Sowerby firmly. "We'll all stand or fall together, no matter what happens; that's agreed. By the way, do you mean that brother of yours from Texas?"

Fraser nodded, and Sowerby turned to Estridge.

"Ever meet him?" he asked. "He's an interesting chap; we've had some dealings with him at the bank. He owns large oil interests down near the border. Older than you, isn't he, Jack? Does he still ride that hobby of his?"

Jack Fraser laughed. "Yes. Ralph is four years my senior, but he is still a perfect kid about collecting queer old weapons of all kinds, particularly firearms." He, too, turned to the lawyer. "I'll be glad to have you meet him, for you may be interested in hearing him rave about his collection. He really has some of the most curious man-killing instruments, and not necessarily ancient either, that were ever devised by murderous-minded cranks. Heaven knows where he picks them up around the globe! But we were not discussing murder, thank goodness! At the worst we may be in for a scandal, though possibly a ruinous one."

Samuel Estridge had nodded politely at the suggestion that he meet the younger man's brother, but there was a sudden tenseness of his easy pose, and the other two, following his gaze, saw that it was fixed upon the door of the house secretary's little box of an office. Philip Dorrance had strolled over to it with an elaborate air of unconcern and disappeared within, but, while the three men by the fireplace watched, he came hurriedly out again, and, fairly stumbling in his haste, made his way to the veranda door and went out.

"By Jove, did you see that!" Fraser exclaimed beneath his breath. "I wonder if the little bounder has just discovered that he has overdrawn his allowance for this month and is afraid to tell his wife!"

"Murdock!" Sowerby called to the steward, who had paused a short distance away to remove some empty glasses. "Bring us three of those devitalized drinks of yours. Is Mr. Grant in his office?"

"Yes, sir. No, sir, Mr. Grant went out just a few minutes ago; I don't know where, sir."

He glided noiselessly away upon his errand, and Sowerby turned to the others. "You see? Dorrance was trying to find Grant, not leaving him

after an unsatisfactory interview. We're getting as gossipy as a pack of old women!"

The glances of Fraser and Estridge met, but they said nothing until the steward returned with three tall glasses upon a tray.

"Murdock"—it was the attorney who spoke—"do you recall a brief conversation I had with you on the first day that Mr. Grant took over his duties?"

The steward placed the glasses upon a table before he replied: "Yes, sir. I have given Mr. Grant all the assistance in my power, sir."

"As I not only reminded you, but explained to him, you have been with the club a long time and are thoroughly familiar with the books," Estridge pursued. "I have no doubt that Mr. Grant was glad to turn over a great many of the minor accounts to you?"

Although his last words were a statement the inflection made them so unmistakably a question that Murdock realized the need of a reply, yet once more he hesitated respectfully.

"Well, sir, I really didn't know all about the books, even in Mr. Martin's time, only the club accounts that have always been in my hands, and, since I am just the steward, I suppose Mr. Grant,

being new, felt personally responsible. He—he seems to be very careful and conscientious I should say, sir."

There was silence, save for an occasional murmur from the bridge players, as Murdock disappeared again within the pantry, but a moment later there came the rattle and clatter of a dropped tray.

"Confound that steward!" Sowerby slammed down his glass. "Did you hear that? No wonder Grant doesn't want him fussing about the books! He's getting more careless every day. I've always said it was a mistake to keep any club attendant too long!"

Samuel Estridge smiled. "I told you a little while ago that, on the very day our investigation assumed a practical form, I could have named three members of the club who gave every indication of separate guilt of some sort, or at least a guilty conscience. We were only looking for one, but I could now name at least five persons, any one of whom—if the other four were eliminated—might be seriously suspected. Gentlemen, do you know what our well-meant efforts have stirred up in this peaceful little community? A hornet's nest, and Heaven knows what will happen before we can stamp it out!"

CHAPTER III

UNDER THE DRAGON LANTERN

BROADLAWNS was glowing with strings of varicolored lanterns. They were hung from tree to tree and bobbing grotesquely in the night wind which had turned soft and balmy with the fickle mellowness of coming Indian summer. Nearer the veranda the rows of motors, parked in a semicircle on the driveway, sent the glare of their lamps out into the darkness, and the clubhouse itself was ablaze with lights and throbbing with the syncopated melodies from the alternating string orchestra and jazz band.

The far corners of the veranda itself had been left discreetly in shadow, with only a bobbing lantern here and there, and, in the brief intervals between dances, fluffily gowned and somberly coated figures appeared for a time and then vanished again within doors, leaving only an occasional couple here and there, too absorbed to be aware that the music had started once more.

Toward the hour before midnight, however, the treacherous softness of the air sharpened, the wind veered to the north and rose, and the sting of frost drove even the hardiest and most persevering of the sentimental couples to the shelter of the conservatory. There, behind a bank of huge chrysanthemums, a dapper young man in faultless evening attire strove vainly to persuade a pretty, colorless, doll-like little woman to seat herself on a rustic bench beside him.

"It's no use, Dorry!" There was a note of pettishness in her voice. "I came because you said that you had something to tell me that I ought to hear, but please hurry! I can't stay a minute!"

"You've got to hear me out, Maud." Phil Dorrance spoke with strange doggedness, and there was an unusual light in his slightly prominent blue eyes. "You've played with me all summer, you've led me to believe that you were ready to chuck everything, and——"

"I thought we had all this out yesterday on the Glen Road!" Maud Sowerby's tones were unmistakably cold now and contemptuous. "I played about with you simply because we were both bored, and you know it. I'm not going to stay here any longer and take the risk of being caught

in a tête-à-tête with you, Dorry. I thought that what you had to say to me would be something new—something, perhaps, connected with my own protection and not your feelings."

He winced at the palpable sneer, and the lips beneath his small mustache curled viciously. "Perhaps what I had to say concerned both, but, since you have become suddenly so discreet, I will not mention it. Shall I take you back now to your husband?"

She looked at him, and the sneer gave place to a whimper. "What is it, Dorry? Do you mean that we are—are both going to get into trouble? We've only carried on a mild sort of flirtation, as you know, but my husband is a brute, and your wife is a cat, and between them, if they wanted to, they might take from us all that we have gained by the years during which we have put up with them!" Her voice rose to a subdued wail. "I couldn't give up my lovely house and my cars and all my luxuries and go back to the typewriter again. I couldn't!"

"Suppose I hadn't taken it for a mild sort of flirtation?" Phil asked grimly. "Suppose I'd burned both our bridges? What then?"

Her anger flamed up anew. "You couldn't burn mine!" she declared through set teeth. "You

haven't even a scrap of a silly, sentimental note from me, and if you've gotten into any stupid mess no one can say I had anything to do with it. You'll have to get out of it the best way you can."

"Is that your last word, Maud?" he demanded slowly, with a sort of deadly earnestness which came oddly from his weak, almost effeminate lips. "I warn you I am more desperate than you know. You meant that?"

"I did. I've been foolish, perhaps, but not wicked, and I intend to protect myself no matter what happens. Do you hear—no matter what happens!"

Phil Dorrance drew himself erect and bowed with a touch of real dignity. "Shall we return now to the ballroom? Under the circumstances, it would be useless for us to continue this conversation, and, as you say, a further tête-à-tête with me may prove a risk for you."

She glanced at him for a moment in mute questioning, then shrugged and turned toward the door. Neither of them had noticed a younger couple who stole in almost guiltily and proceeded to the farther end of the conservatory. Strangely enough the girl's first words were suggestive of those of Maud Sowerby, but with a very different intonation.

"Oh, Gerald, we must hurry! We can't stay a minute! Auntie is holding court in her corner as usual, but, if she discovers that I'm in here with you after all her injunctions, there'll be a dreadful scene when we get home. How—how did Mr. Sowerby treat you at the bank to-day?"

"The same as usual—just as though I didn't exist." Gerald Landon shrugged. "It is only out here, you know, dearest, that he grants me more than a passing nod. We're safe enough, Alice, darling."

"Don't!" She shrank away from him. "Suppose somebody heard you call me that and told auntie, and she went to him! He doesn't like her, but you know what influence she has out here. If they both began investigating——"

"There goes that beastly music, and I've got to haul Mrs. Dorrance around the floor!" Gerald said gloomily, then with a swift movement he gathered the girl into his arms.

She yielded to his kiss, but the next instant she freed herself and placed a flowering shrub between them. "Gerald! How could you! Some one might have seen! There's something strange going on. I know it! Something that we don't understand, but it frightens me! Did you see that notice on the bulletin board outside the

billiard room, that any member or guest of the club, desiring to leave before the final dance, would kindly see Mr. Estridge first? I have heard heaps of people discussing it. Do you suppose it means a special meeting of some kind? That Mr. Grant isn't in his office to-night!"

"I couldn't help it, Alice. No one saw, and I don't know why you keep bothering about that house secretary. The last I saw of him he was standing right under the dragon lantern on the veranda, right in front of that wide window which faces across the foyer to the stairs and the two little offices—his and Murdock's—on either side of the balustrade. He was watching the dancing, and I felt kind of sorry for him, poor chap, being out of it all. And don't you worry your darling little head about old Estridge and his bulletins; there never was a house committee on a country club yet that didn't try to show its importance on every possible occasion. If it had been anything serious Jack Fraser would have told me about it, since he put me up here. But we must hurry! Here comes Ralph Fraser for you now."

Jack Fraser's brother, from Texas, of whom he and Rutherford Sowerby had spoken on the previous day, was a big, broad-shouldered man of thirty-five. His bluff, hearty, outspoken man-

ner hinted at one who knew more of boom towns than ultra-smart suburban colonies, and his keen eyes took in the situation between the two at a glance.

"Look here, Miss Dare, if I'm butting in we'll just forget all about this dance," he began. "I'm rotten at it, anyhow—can't lift my hulking feet off the floor."

"Oh, no!" It was Gerald who spoke, but Alice had seized upon the newcomer almost feverishly. She feared that he had divined their attachment and might blurt out to others that an engagement existed between them. Gerald added hurriedly: "I have this dance with Mrs. Dorrance, and was only waiting until you came for Miss Dare. See you both later!"

He bowed, and then fairly bolted from the conservatory. In addition to the ballroom the great, round entrance hall had been given over to the dancers, forcing the "old guard" to the billiard room except for one corner, where Mrs. de Forest sat majestically with a group of sycophants and social climbers about her.

Gerald noted with relief that she was still there and holding forth to those who seemingly hung upon her words; then he turned to survey the scene for the partner for whom he had come so

tardily. Phil Dorrance came hurriedly up to him.

"I say, old man, have you seen anything of that chap Grant? He's not in his office."

"He's out on the veranda there, I believe." Gerald added with hasty mendacity: "I've been looking everywhere for your wife; I have this dance with her, but I can't find her."

"Can't you?" Phil responded nervously in an absent tone, and the other noticed all at once how haggard he seemed to have grown. "I haven't looked her up myself since my last dance with her an hour ago, but I suppose you'll find her around here somewhere. Grant is on the veranda, you say?"

Without waiting for a reply, he was off, while Gerald gazed after him for a moment in amazement. What could have been the matter with Dorrance? There had been an air of suppressed excitement and strained anxiety about him; such as he had observed on men during a run on the bank. This troubled mien was utterly foreign to Dorrance's usual complacently self-satisfied attitude. And what could he want with Grant? The house secretary's office always remained closed during a dance or other festivity, the steward attending to anything necessary from his own office.

Gerald glanced toward it across the hall on the other side of the staircase and saw Murdock seated behind his desk. The steward was watching the dancers from beneath respectfully lowered eyelids. Why hadn't Dorrance gone to Murdock if he had wanted anything?

At that moment Mrs. Dorrance came down the staircase and approached him. "So sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Landon," she murmured, forestalling the apology which Gerald himself had been about to make. "Such a stupid accident! I had to have my gown mended. Mr. Bowles is usually a perfect dancer, but he must have an attack of nerves or something to-night. We were passing that open window there, where the dragon lantern is swinging outside, when he stumbled and his foot caught in my skirt. Of course I don't like to say anything, but I think the use to which the men put their lockers these days is a disgrace to the club."

"Shall we dance?" Gerald asked diplomatically. "Elsie—Mrs. Fraser—told me that Mr. Bowles was bringing Mrs. Carter to the dance to-night. Have you seen her?"

"Yes." Mrs. Dorrance moved heavily off in step with him, carefully conserving her breath.

"She must have been really ill. I thought it a pose—didn't bother to call—but she looks like a ghost. Red-headed women always need high color, or low lights."

Midnight was approaching, and the scurrying waiters were adding the last touches to the supper tables in the restaurant. It had become the custom of the club, since the war, to hold an ordinary informal dance on this evening. Previously it had been given over to a masked ball which was rivaled in gayety only by the ante-bellum Election Night and New Year's Eve affairs. Now, exactly at midnight, all the lights were to be extinguished except a swinging lantern or two outside, and, although no appropriate toast could be drunk, a simple song of long ago would be sung by the assembled company in memory of those who would return no more to Broadlawns. Supper would follow, and then dancing would be resumed for an hour or two, but the fun would be more subdued, and the party break up long before the dawn.

More than one pair of eyes sought the tall clock in the corner as the witching hour approached. A tall, willowy woman, who entered from the ballroom, leaning on Ogden Bowles' arm, looked solicitously in the direction of the clock. Her face

was waxen, and her large, topaz-glinting eyes were deeply circled by not unbecoming blue shadows.

"Perhaps I should not have urged you to dance," the broker murmured solicitously as she paused, swaying for a moment with one hand at her slim throat. "I hope it did not tire you too much. Shall we sit out the rest in the conservatory?"

Mrs. Carter shook her head, and her hand slipped down and rested upon her breast as she replied: "No, thanks, I am not tired, but just a little dizzy, I think. Let us go out to the veranda for a few minutes and get a breath of air."

"You won't take cold?" he asked. "Can't I get your wrap for you? You left it in the downstairs cloak room, I think."

"If you will be so good." She smiled faintly at him. "I will wait for you in the conservatory."

Yet, when he had departed upon his errand, Mrs. Carter waited only until he had disappeared, then moved swiftly over to the entrance door and out into the chilly obscurity of the veranda. At first she blinked in the sudden transition from the brilliantly lighted foyer and could see nothing but the faint, swaying blur of the lanterns. Then she beheld a stocky, bareheaded figure with a shock

of heavy hair, standing over by the railing with his back to her.

Save for his presence, the veranda was deserted, and Mrs. Carter halted, but at that moment the music of the one-step ceased, and the crunch of footsteps on the gravel of the driveway was plainly audible. She moved over noiselessly to the railing, and had almost reached the unconscious figure before she spoke: "Good evening, Mr. Grant."

"Ah, Mrs.—er—Carter!" The house secretary turned deferentially and peered at her through his heavy-rimmed glasses as he bowed. "I had heard some of the other members say that you were ill, but I'm glad that your indisposition has passed."

"Thank you," she responded quietly. "It was nothing serious. Ever since I came North again to live I have found the first change from summer to autumn very trying, but I have no doubt I shall grow accustomed to it in time."

"You have lived in the Southwest?" he asked quickly.

"No, in North Carolina." She spoke with a trace of surprise in her well-bred, level tones, and in the shadows the hand upon her breast tensed

suddenly and then dropped to her side. "What part of the Southwest were you told that I came from, Mr. Grant?"

"No one has mentioned your name, Mrs. Carter. When you spoke of coming North again I thought instinctively of Dallas, Texas. You were not there by any chance about three years ago?"

"I have never been in Texas in my life." Mrs. Carter laughed in half-bored amusement, but her laughter ended in a little shiver as a cutting sweep of the night breeze sent the dry leaves eddying along the drive. "Did you fancy that you had seen me there, or some one, perhaps, of the same name? I do not think my late husband had any connections in Dallas."

"No." Mr. Grant shook his head. "It was not the name, although that of the lady you resemble sounded very like yours. I saw her under circumstances which tended to impress her upon my memory, and, if you will pardon me for being personal, Mrs. Carter, when I first saw you here at the club it was as though she herself had walked into my little office."

"How interesting!" Mrs. Carter laughed again with a slight note of irony and turned as Ogden Bowles emerged upon the veranda with her wrap.

"I would feel more curiosity as to the identity of this mysterious double of mine, Mr. Grant, were she not about the fiftieth of whom I have been told. There must be something about auburn hair which makes all its possessors seem akin."

"If I dared I should scold you for coming out here without waiting for your cape, Mrs. Carter!" There was playful concern in Ogden Bowles' tone. "I looked for you in the conservatory, but found no one there except little Miss Dare and Ralph Fraser. Evening, Grant!"

The house secretary returned the salutation, and then, as the music started again, he moved away and took up his stand once more in the window beneath the dragon lantern.

Mrs. Carter, instead of permitting her escort to place her wrap about her shoulders, took it from him and laid it over her arm.

"You would rather dance?" Bowles asked. "This is the last before midnight, you know, but I did not think you felt up to it."

"I don't." Mrs. Carter smiled wanly. "You'll forgive me, won't you, if I run away to the dressing room upstairs and rest for a few minutes? I'll join you in the foyer after the singing is over and the lights go up."

"As my lady pleases," he replied with a dar-

ingly tender note in his tones. "You will find me waiting for you at the foot of the stairs."

At the moment before the music struck up Ralph Fraser, in the conservatory, was asking in a curiously detached tone: "Who is the Mrs. Carter for whom Mr. Bowles was inquiring just now? I don't believe I have met her."

"She's that tall, awfully pretty, red-haired woman he brought to the dance to-night," Alice Dare replied. "Surely you must have seen her; she is so striking looking that she quite puts every one else in the shade, although she never seems to make the slightest effort to do so."

"So she is Mrs. Carter." Fraser paused and then added: "I noticed her when they came, but only because there seemed to be something oddly familiar about her that I couldn't place. Is she a resident of the neighborhood?"

"Yes. She came from the South somewhere about two years ago and purchased the Horton cottage. Don't you think the way she wears her hair drawn over her ears makes her look positively saintly?" Alice demanded with girlish enthusiasm. "Not another woman at Broadlawns would dare attempt it! I think that is one reason why they are catty to her—all except Mrs. Jack Fraser—but she is so sweet she never seems

to notice it. Oh, here comes your brother for me now, and you have this dance with Mrs. Jack, haven't you?"

Gerald Landon, having thankfully relinquished Mrs. Dorrance to her husband, appeared hopefully in the door of the conservatory. As Alice passed with Jack Fraser she gave him the coolest of little nods, conscious that her aunt's sharp eyes were upon her from her stronghold in the corner of the foyer.

Gerald hovered disconsolately in the doorway, and once again his gaze traveled idly out over the scene. The orchestra jazzed its maddest melody, and the hands of the tall clock crept nearer, minute by minute, to twelve. Waiters still dodged hurriedly between the dancers, with the final articles for the supper room; Murdock, the steward, had risen behind his desk and was reaching over with a golf stick or cane as though to intercept one of them; all at once the merry pandemonium ceased abruptly in the middle of a bar, the laughing, chattering voices died, and in the sudden silence the silvery chimes of midnight sounded from the clock. As they rang out upon the stillness the lights dimmed to a dull orange glow, and with the twelfth note they went out. Only the weird glim-

mer of the dragon lantern on the veranda lighted the scene. The dancers stood motionless, and softly there pulsed out upon the air the throbbing tones of the violins in the first notes of "Auld Lang Syne."

Gently, with the tenderness of reminiscence, voices took it up here and there, swelling as they were gradually augmented by others in the well-known refrain:

" 'Should auld acquaintance be forgot—' "

A sharp report crackling across the wide foyer brought the music to an abrupt halt. Almost simultaneously with it a woman screamed, and then there came a choking cry and a hideous, slithering sound, followed by a heavy thud from somewhere outside.

"Lights!" Ralph Fraser's quick, authoritative tones broke the instant of strained silence, and, after a fumbling interval, the foyer and then the whole lower floor of the clubhouse burst into effulgence.

That broke the tension, and every one crowded eagerly forward in the wake of Ralph Fraser, who had started for the veranda in the direction from which the cry and dull sound of a fall had come. But, in advance of all the others, Samuel

Estridge passed Mrs. Carter, where she had halted at the foot of the staircase. The steward bent for a moment beneath his desk, and then vaulted over it as the attorney reached the veranda door.

After one look Estridge turned to Ralph Fraser, at his elbow. "Back!" he exclaimed. "Keep the women back!"

But it was too late. The onrush had been too strong to be stemmed, and men and women together swarmed out upon the veranda. Beneath the dragon lantern, before the open window which looked in upon the foyer, something lay stretched full length upon the floor. It was a man's stocky form, and there seemed something strangely familiar and yet unfamiliar about it. He was obviously a young man, scarcely in his thirties, with wide-open, staring dark eyes and sleek black hair. Under the swaying light of the lantern it seemed that he leered horribly at them.

"Who is it? What has happened to him?" a voice demanded sharply. And then they all saw.

Beside the still head there lay a crushed and twisted pair of heavy-rimmed glasses and a wig of coarse, sandy hair, while upon the breast a splotch of crimson had widened slowly, and a tiny rivulet trickled down from it to the floor.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Samuel Estridge turned to the huddled, horror-stricken group behind him, "it is the man whom you knew as James Grant, our recently acquired house secretary. He has been shot!"

CHAPTER IV

THE GLISTENING STRAND

IT was Murdock, the steward, who first found his voice. "Grant's shot," he said, and advanced excitedly, brandishing the golf stick which he had stooped behind his desk to pick up the instant before he vaulted over. "Who did it, sir? He's not——"

Jack Fraser and Ogden Bowles were beside Estridge, who bent over the body, and the former replied briefly: "I'm afraid so. Ralph!"

But his brother, after hearing the alarm, seemed for the moment to have disappeared, and Estridge, rising, took command of the situation.

"Jack, jump in your car and drive as fast as you can for Doctor Fellowes." He drew the younger man aside for a moment; then, as the latter nodded in comprehension and dashed headlong down the veranda steps, he returned to the terror-stricken group. "The rest of you go inside, please; let no one leave the club. Murdock,

round up all the waiters and cooks and other attendants, and see that they are kept under guard in the billiard room. Bowles, would you mind going with Murdock to see that they are all detained? Landon, call Rutherford Sowerby, will you?"

"Who is this man, anyway?" Phil Dorrance's voice fairly squeaked in his excitement. "Why was he here disguised like that?"

No one paid any heed to him, however. Doctor Fellowes was the general practitioner for the Broadlawns colony, and he was the county coroner as well. There had been a grave significance in Estridge's manner after his examination of the body, and no doubt was left as to the grim capacity in which the physician's presence was required.

"I am here." Rutherford Sowerby's deep growl sounded close at hand, and he limped painfully forward as the rest, in obedience to Estridge's command, retreated within doors. Here Mrs. Sowerby created a counter diversion by fainting.

"Well, Rutherford, somebody has done for our man." The attorney turned to the other. "Jack Fraser is the only member of the house committee present to-night besides ourselves, and I've sent him for the coroner. I've also seen to it that no

one—member, guest, or club attendant—leaves before they are officially permitted to do so."

"Humph! Locked the stable door after the horse was stolen, have you?" Sowerby stood gazing grimly down at the body. "I heard the shot, but I thought it was a bursting automobile tire. I'm not surprised, though. I was fool enough to let you and the rest of the house committee overrule me, but, if you'll remember, when the idea of planting him here was first suggested, I warned you that he should have some associates at hand to work with him. This wasn't any one-man job. They've got onto him, and he must have discovered something at last. Or, suppose that Harvest Dance affair has been repeated to-night after all, and he's been gotten out of the way!"

At this moment Ralph Fraser reappeared and came quickly toward them.

"Mr. Estridge, you seem to be in charge," he remarked. "I've had a little experience with affairs of this sort down where I come from, and, if I can be of any assistance, please command me. I take it that this Grant wasn't just what he was supposed to be."

"He wasn't," Estridge replied briefly. He was kneeling beside the body, rapidly going through the pockets, and now he rose with a long strip of

paper in his hand. "You can help us if you will be so good, Fraser. Here is a list of all the members, guests, club attendants, and extra waiters hired from the caterers for this occasion. Your brother has gone for the coroner, but every one else must remain until they are officially permitted to leave by the authorities. Will you see to it? Bowles and Landon are attending to it, but they can't keep an eye on every one, and naturally all of us are technically under suspicion."

"Where are all the chauffeurs and the watchman, anyway?" Sowerby glanced out at the semicircle of empty cars. "You slipped up there, Sam!"

Ralph smiled. "That's why I beat it indoors as soon as I saw what had happened, and that Grant had worn a wig and glasses, evidently for no other purpose than to make himself appear some one who he wasn't. I'm only a guest here, gentlemen, a stranger, and not in your confidence, but I surmised something of the truth. Seeing that the driveway was deserted I took it upon myself to corral those whom you might overlook in the first excitement. The chauffeurs and watchman were shooting crap in that room off the kitchen, and, if I'm any judge, they were all so intent that none of them even heard the shot. But I took care to

explain to them that it wouldn't be healthy for any of them to leave the room until they were sent for. I had the brass to use your name, Mr. Estridge."

"I'm glad you did, and you've rendered us all a service in acting so promptly," the attorney responded cordially. "If Doctor Fellowes isn't out on a case, Jack ought to have him here in a few minutes now, but time is precious, and I'd like to have all the data available for him and the other county authorities that we can gather. Sorry I can't take you completely into our confidence now, but, besides Mr. Sowerby and your brother, no one present to-night, except myself, knows the real identity of Grant, nor why he has been here incognito."

"No one but the person who fired the shot, Sam," Sowerby interrupted dryly. "He must either have guessed the truth and been waiting for this occasion and the moment of darkness to rid himself of danger of retribution for what happened before, or planned another coup for to-night. How many cars brought people here this evening? Does anybody know? It would have been easy enough, in that minute before the lights were turned on again, for the murderer to have made off with anybody's car, or slipped away on

foot through the shrubbery, for that matter. This thing has been bungled from start to finish, but no one would listen to me!"

"It has been bungled fatally as far as poor Grant is concerned, and I feel criminally responsible for not foreseeing the possibility of this crime, but as for the rest—well——" Estridge shrugged his shoulders. "Whoever shot him is still in the clubhouse, Rutherford, you can depend upon that, or, if he is skulking about the grounds, he will soon be brought in. Do you remember our conversation yesterday? You were impatient that Grant had not accomplished the purpose for which we brought him here, and you predicted a repetition of the Harvest Dance affair. I didn't think it expedient to tell you then what I had arranged on my own initiative, but I happen to know our watchman's predilection for a congenial crap game, and Grant couldn't have been expected to keep an eye on everything to-night. I have some picked men scattered about the grounds and the roads leading to the club. They have orders not to close in before I give them a certain signal, no matter what they hear, unless they catch some one trying to leave."

"Suppose they've closed in on Jack Fraser!" Sowerby suggested.

"No fear of that! You saw me draw him aside before I sent him for the coroner; that was to give him a countersign which would be recognized if he were stopped," replied Estridge. Whipping a large silk handkerchief from his pocket, he stooped once more and laid it over the face of the dead man. Then he remarked: "We must not move the body, of course, and I have reasons of my own for preferring to remain beside it until the coroner arrives. In the meantime, Fraser, if you'll just go and see that Bowles and Landon keep the crowd in order and quieted."

"Certainly." Ralph Fraser paused in the doorway. "Have you examined the wound?"

"Only superficially," the attorney responded. "It was caused by a bullet of small caliber, and it must have pierced the heart, but the autopsy will determine the details definitely. There were no powder marks, as you see, so it must have been fired from some distance."

" 'A bullet of small caliber,' " repeated Fraser thoughtfully. "I don't know how highly you rate the capabilities of your local authorities, Mr. Estridge, nor what is back of this little affair, but it looks as though they would find their work cut out for them, doesn't it?"

He disappeared within, and Estridge turned to

the bank president. "Rutherford, get rid of any one who may happen to be in the locker room and, when you're sure that you are alone, use the farthest booth from the door. Tell the operator to give you a clear wire, and be careful not to speak loud enough for the others to hear you."

"Say, Sam, it seems to me there's enough darned mystery about this thing without your making more of it! I'm a member of the house committee, too, you know!" interrupted Sowerby. "Of course we deputized you to engage this fellow Grant, but what is the idea of stationing the guards about without taking us into your confidence? I suppose that notice on the bulletin board, which has set so many tongues wagging, meant that those who left early and didn't come to you for your fool, melodramatic countersign would be held up. What excuse would you have given?"

"None but the truth," Estridge replied quietly. "That, in view of the fact that so many valuable jewels were worn by the ladies present this evening, it had been thought best to station extra watchmen about the grounds who would permit no one to pass out without proving his identity. As a matter of fact no one has attempted to leave."

"'Thought best!'" snorted the other resent-

fully. "Who the deuce asked you to think for the whole club, Sam? Not but what the idea was a sensible one, but why didn't you tell, at least, young Fraser and me, as the only other members of the house committee who intended to be present? It was confoundedly irregular of you! What's this mysterious 'reason of your own' for hanging around the poor fellow's body till the coroner gets here, and who was he, anyway?"

"Your last question will be answered if you'll telephone, as I was about to ask you, Rutherford." Estridge was unruffled by the outburst of his companion. "Call up O'Hare's Detective Agency in New York and tell them that Jim Doyle, the operative whom they assigned to the job out here, has been done in, and that the county authorities have been notified. Give them the barest details, say that you have got to be careful of an open wire, that you are speaking for me, and that I will communicate with them personally and at length in the morning."

"So he was one of O'Hare's men, eh?" The bank president stared. "I presume you know what that kind of a message will do, don't you? It will bring more of O'Hare's private detectives out here to clash with the local authorities."

"That is precisely what I want," returned Es-

tridge. "Not a clash with the local authorities, necessarily, but we can't avoid notoriety now in any case, and we need the most expert assistance we can obtain. O'Hare is not the sort to let an operative of his be killed in the line of duty without knowing why and by whom, and, if I'm not mistaken, he'll put his star man on the job as soon as he can get him here. We'll need him, Rutherford—we're in deep waters."

"Not too deep for you to swim in, though!" Sowerby's small eyes crinkled at the corners. "I forgot your record in the courts, and I'll take back what I said; I guess you can do the thinking for the club, Sam. I'll phone O'Hare, and then, if you want me, you will find me with the rest."

Estridge then reached inside the sash and pulled down the shade. Next he closed the window and stood for a minute staring down at the body of the dead detective. Doyle, or Grant, as the other club members had known him, had not been off duty on this night of all nights as the attorney very well realized. Why had he taken up his station at that particular window and never left it? Was it merely to watch the dancing, to carry out his impersonation of the house secretary, the employee who was yet accorded the privilege of looking on at that in which he might not share,

or had he had some deeper motive for maintaining that point of vantage?

The opened window gave an unobstructed view of the huge entrance hall which was being used for the overflow from the ballroom; a view, also, of his own closed office door, of Murdock's desk, and the wide staircase between, as well as glimpses of the conservatory on one side, and the supper room on the other. Surely the detective could not have chosen a more central and, at the same time, unobtrusive position, yet there were other windows in the row on either side of the veranda door from which he could have looked in on precisely the same scene—windows above which no glowing lantern hung to make him so sure a mark in that moment of semi-darkness!

Estridge glanced involuntarily up at the grotesque dragon swaying above him, and he discovered that the light within it was flickering crazily. He knew that most of the lanterns had been strung on electric wires connected with the main switch, so that they, together with the brackets and chandeliers within doors, might be extinguished for that midnight moment of respect to "absent members," but at stated intervals along the veranda some were to have been fitted with candles and left to give a slight glow of light. The dragon

lantern must have been one of the latter, and now its short candle length was guttering; had the pseudo-secretary known of this arrangement?

While the attorney stood meditating the candle flared suddenly and went out, and the writhing dragon became merely a decoration in red and black, and the lantern itself suddenly collapsed and fell to the floor at his feet. Estridge started mechanically to pick it up when something within it caught his eye—something which gleamed in the electric lights like a coil of sparks.

With an exclamation he glanced about him at the deserted veranda, then, stooping swiftly beneath the line of the window ledge, lest his shadow show against the shade, he drew forth from the base of the lantern a strand which glittered in his hands like living fire.

Backing away from the window, he straightened and looked down at the still form at his feet.

"I know now." His lips formed the words in a toneless whisper. "You turned the trick, Doyle, even though it cost you your life! You made good, and no man can do more!"

CHAPTER V

RENWICK CRANE ARRIVES

THE shrill note of the siren, which cut the night air not many minutes after Estridge's discovery, was followed by the droning roar of an engine, and Jack Fraser's car swirled madly up the curving drive to stop with a jolt before the veranda steps.

"Is that you, Estridge?" the latter called cautiously. "We're in luck. I found the sheriff playing checkers with Doctor Fellowes and brought him along, too!"

"Good evening, doctor, or rather good morning, for it is past midnight." Estridge advanced and held out his hand as a tall, slightly stoop-shouldered man with a trimly pointed gray beard mounted the steps, followed by a corpulent, but surprisingly active, figure. "Sheriff, I suppose Mr. Fraser has told you of the crime which has been committed here to-night. I am prepared to give you all the details in our possession and to

assure you that no one has been permitted to leave the premises."

They shook hands, and the coroner proceeded straightway to his investigation of the body, but Sheriff Coburn, after a more cursory glance at it, turned again to the attorney.

"I'll let the doc have his innings first, Mr. Estridge, but I'd like the truth about what Mr. Fraser tried to tell us while we were whizzing out here. I understand that the dead man has been acting as an employee of the club for the past few days, but he was actually a city detective, engaged on the quiet by some of you to find out who has been committing some robberies." His usually good-natured eyes blinked resentfully in his round face. "I suppose our country methods weren't good enough for you city folks who have settled out our way, but that's neither here nor there. Your smart operative has let the thief get the drop on him, and now it's up to us after all. We'll want the whole story, sir, that we should have had in the beginning."

"You'll have it, sheriff." Estridge's tone was the blandly conciliatory one which many an assistant district attorney knew to the cost of his prestige and the loss of the State's case. "Some minor discrepancies appeared in the club's accounts after

the departure of our former secretary, Mr. Martin, which we—the house committee—preferred to make up out of our own pockets rather than start a scandal."

"Didn't strike you, as a lawyer, that you were pretty near compounding a felony, did it, Mr. Estridge?" The sheriff rubbed his chin reflectively.

"Hardly," Estridge observed. "Martin could have had nothing to do with the crime which we employed this detective to investigate; the robbery took place after his departure for the West —on the night of our Harvest Dance, in fact. You would have been notified at once, but the victim herself objected to any stir being made about it in the neighborhood and preferred to call in a private detective from the city."

"'Herself?' repeated the sheriff. "One of the ladies was robbed? What was it, jewelry? Who was it?"

"It was Mrs. de Forest, and she was robbed of this." As he spoke the attorney drew from his pocket the glistening strand, which he had found coiled about the base of the dragon lantern, and extended it to the county official who retreated a step, his eyes bulging.

"You don't say!" he exclaimed. "That's not

Mrs. de Forest's necklace, the famous de Forest diamonds?"

Samuel Estridge nodded. "They dropped or were clipped from her neck some time during the Harvest Dance which was held late in September; as soon as she discovered her loss, with rare presence of mind, she made no scene, but reported the matter quietly to various members of the house committee, of which I was one. After the dance was over we held a special meeting, and the course, which we subsequently adopted, was decided upon," he resumed. "I was deputized to engage a man from O'Hare's agency to come down here and pose as the new club secretary in order to get in touch with both members and attendants and discover, if he could, the identity of the thief. You see, sheriff, every one here that night was virtually open to possible suspicion of having stolen the string of diamonds, just as every one present this evening is a possible suspect of murder."

"Then this man didn't find out who had taken the necklace?" demanded the sheriff as he took the strand of gleaming jewels from the attorney and ran it gingerly through his pudgy fingers. "Mr. Fraser didn't have time to tell us whether

Grant had made an ante-mortem statement or not."

"Grant—or Doyle, to give him his real name—must have died instantly, and I am afraid we shall never know the whole truth about to-night," responded Estridge gravely. "We can only be certain that he discovered the hiding place of the diamonds and was keeping guard beneath it until such time as he might take possession of them without the knowledge of the thief; but the latter must have suspected his intention and fired the fatal shot when the lights were lowered for a few minutes at midnight."

"What were the lights lowered for? You folks dance till all hours out here. You say that this fellow Doyle was keeping guard beneath the place where the diamonds were hidden; then, if the body hasn't been moved——" The sheriff was not permitted to finish his question.

"It hasn't," said Estridge. "They were inside that Chinese lantern which swung just above the window all this evening. I only discovered them myself by accident, a few minutes before your arrival. The lantern fell, and, if you will examine the diamonds, even in this light you will see that congealed candle grease is still adhering to them."

Doctor Fellowes had concluded his preliminary

examination of the body, and now he approached silently and listened while the attorney briefly, but concisely, summed up the events of the night.

"What do you make of it, doc?" Sheriff Coburn asked with the familiarity of lifelong association. "How far off was the shot fired?"

"A considerable distance, I should say; I don't want to commit myself before the autopsy, but I think a high-powered pistol of small caliber was used, and it might have been fired anywhere from twenty to forty feet away," Doctor Fellowes replied cautiously. "The bullet penetrated or passed very close to the heart."

The sheriff was obviously much impressed. "You've hit on a mighty valuable clew right there! It would take a pretty good shot——" He broke off suddenly, remembering the presence of Samuel Estridge. While the sheriff walked over to examine the dead man for himself, the coroner asked: "You've got a light motor truck here belonging to the club, haven't you, Mr. Estridge? I've seen it going to the station with golf bags. I'd like to remove the body in that for the autopsy. Have you notified the detective agency of his death?"

"Yes; another member of the house committee, President Rutherford Sowerby of the Tradesmen's

Bank, has done so." Estridge paused. "I may add that only he, Mrs. de Forest, Mr. Jack Fraser, and myself were aware, until to-night's tragedy, that the necklace was stolen, or that Doyle was other than the club secretary he pretended to be. The other members of the house committee, who were present at the special meeting after the Harvest Dance, have been either ill or away since that night, and we had not then decided in what capacity we would introduce a private detective here. For reasons which are obvious, of course, we should like to keep this whole affair as quiet as possible and avoid all the scandal and notoriety that we can, at any rate, until the identity of the criminal has been discovered."

Doctor Fellowes shook his head. "You won't find that very easy if every one rushed out here after the shot was fired and saw that the man had been palpably disguised," he remarked. "The caterer's people and the orchestra from the city are bound to talk to reporters."

"Oh, you'll have to stand for the notoriety, all right, Mr. Estridge!" The sheriff had hung the lightless lantern again on its hook and rejoined them in time to catch the drift of the coroner's words. "Even if Mrs. de Forest hasn't told them by now of the theft of her necklace, it's all bound

to come out at the inquest. Here's Mr. Fraser."

Jack Fraser had parked his car, stopped for a brief conversation with one of the special guards who had been stationed about the grounds, and now he ascended the veranda steps and came toward them. Arrangements were quickly made for him to take out the light motor truck and drive the coroner and his gruesome charge back to the village. The sheriff and Estridge entered the main hall of the clubhouse.

A strange sight met their gaze where so short a time before groups of light-hearted people had dominated the scene. The center of the floor was deserted and littered with gloves, handkerchiefs, and broken-plumed fans. Young Mrs. Sowerby was stretched upon a bench which had been hastily drawn from the conservatory. Jack Fraser's wife and Alice Dare were ministering to her, and, near the closed door of the late pseudo-secretary's little office, Phil Dorrance had buttonholed the reluctant Gerald Landon and appeared to be questioning him excitedly. At the foot of the stairs, where she had halted when the report of the shot came, Mrs. Carter had seated herself, and Ogden Bowles bent solicitously above her, but of Rutherford Sowerby, Ralph Fraser, and Murdock there was no sign.

Sounds of varying degrees of hysteria from the

conservatory, ballroom, and supper rooms indicated where the rest of the women members and guests had taken refuge—all save two. Mrs. de Forest was once more in her chair in the corner, tacitly reserved for her at all club functions, but her usually erect figure was huddled, and her face seemed suddenly to have become lined and very old. She was staring straight before her, apparently oblivious to the soothing utterances of her one faithful satellite, Mrs. Dorrance, but she roused herself and glanced up as the attorney and the sheriff approached.

"I have been a proud old woman, Mr. Coburn, and indirectly that poor young man's death lies at my door!" she said brokenly. "If I had not insisted to the house committee on avoiding village gossip and the hounding of society reporters from town by having a private investigation conducted, he would never have come here to meet his end!"

The sheriff had always been secretly in awe of this grand lady of the fashionable colony which had invaded Broadlawns and, like most of the natives, had cloaked this feeling beneath an attitude of swaggering independence. But, before her disarming self-abasement, his good nature reasserted itself, and he replied with grim humor: "No, ma'am. You would probably have called in Con-

stable Meeks, and he would have called in me, and then, if either of us had been as successful as that young man was in what he undertook, we'd most likely be lying where he is to-night; that is, if we'd been so careless as to stay in the light!"

"'Successful!'" Mrs. de Forest caught up the word with a sharp exclamation. She turned in bewilderment to the attorney. "Mr. Estridge, what does the sheriff mean?"

Mrs. Dorrance was staring from one to the other of them with avid interest, and Sheriff Coburn interposed bluntly: "I'll be glad to tell you, ma'am, if you will come where we can talk privately. I understand that this affair isn't to be known generally throughout the club, just yet."

"Poor Mr. Grant's office is bolted, but why not try the ladies' locker room?" Mrs. Dorrance suggested, rising. "I know there must be some terrible mystery back of what has happened to-night, and I won't intrude, but, dear Mrs. de Forest, I am sure you will confide in me as soon as the opportunity offers."

She bowed to the sheriff and Samuel Estridge, and, as she moved away, the attorney observed: "That was not a bad suggestion. Shall we adjourn to the ladies' locker room?"

Mrs. de Forest rose, masking her agitation from

those in the hall who might be watching them. The three made their way to the room indicated, and here the sheriff, after carefully fastening the door, drew from his pocket the necklace and placed it in the lady's hands.

"My diamonds!" she exclaimed. "But where ——?"

"I'm sorry not to be able to explain now, ma'am, and I'll have to ask you to return them to me again as evidence. I only wanted you to know that they were safe, and I'll give you a receipt for them. You positively identify them, don't you?"

"Unless this is a paste replica, which only an expert could detect, it is indeed my necklace," Mrs. de Forest affirmed. "I would be overjoyed at recovering it if it were not for the fact that it cost that unfortunate young detective his life! Do you know who took it from me at the Harvest Dance, or who fired that shot to-night?"

"No, ma'am." The sheriff, who had been laboriously writing a receipt, now held the paper out to her. "If you'll just give me back that necklace it will be produced at the inquest and then returned to you, provided nobody's held for trial. Till then I take it that Mr. Sowerby, Mr. Fraser, and Mr. Estridge will be glad if you'd keep as

quiet about losing it at all as you have during the past month. Of course all the folks here to-night know that Grant was at the club in disguise, and that he was murdered, but no one knows why, and no one but the murderer himself knows yet who pulled the trigger."

"Take it!" Mrs. de Forest extended the necklace with a gesture of repulsion. "I feel as though there were a stain upon it! But I don't in the least understand."

"Mr. Estridge will have to explain to you later, ma'am; I've got other things to do now before the coroner gets back. You know that we work kind of independently in a case like this, and we can't keep the folks here up all night." Sheriff Coburn wrapped the diamonds in his handkerchief and stowed them carefully in an inside pocket. "Got mighty near onto a hundred people here, counting extra help and all, I understand from Mr. Fraser, and it will be some job to weed them out. Mr. Estridge, can I see you for a minute?"

"Look here, sheriff, what was your idea in hanging that lantern back on the hook from which it fell when the candle guttered?" the attorney asked when they had taken their leave of the lady and started toward the billiard room.

The sheriff winked slyly. "Unless you yourself

put that necklace there, Mr. Estridge, nobody but us and the coroner knows that it has been discovered. I put the lantern back in place before Mr. Fraser came up to the porch after parking his car, and I figured that, as soon as he dared, the thief would be looking for the jewels where he hid them," he replied. "That wouldn't be right away—not within half an hour or so after the body was taken off—for fear of drawing attention to himself, but I'd like to swear you in as a special deputy, until I can get one of the boys out from the village, and have you kind of hang around where you can watch that lantern from now on and see who goes near it. As a club member you could do it in a natural sort of way that would scare the fellow off, whoever he is, without his actually suspecting that you knew anything. Got a revolver or pistol here at the club?"

"None that I know of, sheriff," Estridge said. "Suppose, in spite of my presence near that lantern, either inside the window or out on the veranda, the murderer takes a chance and, on some plausible excuse attempts to remove it? He must be pretty desperate, you know, and he's playing for high stakes. I'm not as young as I was, but I'll tackle him if you say so."

"I believe you would, sir!" the sheriff responded admiringly. "We've heard out here of a few fellows, whom you've had sent up, who threatened to get you when they came out, but none of them tried it yet! However, I'm not asking you to look for trouble; if nobody actually tries to touch the lantern don't bother 'em, just get a good look at anybody who hangs around so that you can identify 'em later. But, if anybody tries to tamper with it, don't stop to question 'em, cover 'em with this!"

They had paused in a deserted corner of the rear hall, and Sheriff Coburn thrust into the hands of his newly appointed deputy a short, but heavy, old-fashioned revolver, which Estridge inserted in the pocket of his dinner jacket. He rarely appeared at the club in more formal evening attire.

"I understand, sheriff." With a nod he sauntered back across the rotunda. The return of Jack Fraser's car, bearing Doctor Fellowes and a third man on the spare seat, gave him an excuse for evading the eager questions which assailed him from all sides.

"The sheriff is interviewing the waiters and assistant stewards in the billiard room, I believe,"

Estridge replied to the coroner's inquiry. "The watchman and the chauffeurs are in a room off the kitchen, and you'll find the members and guests scattered about within doors."

"Good! This is Constable Meeks." Doctor Fellowes indicated the tall, shambling, ungainly figure which had occupied the spare seat in the little runabout. "Any parties, club members, or extra help whom he conducts outside you'll know the sheriff and I have finished with for the time being. Mr. Fraser can give them the word that will let them past your special watchmen if they should be stopped in the grounds."

Estridge nodded to the constable, and the three entered the hall. Estridge then took up his solitary vigil. Pacing the veranda he seemed lost in thought, but in reality he was watching keenly for a flitting shadow against the windows, or a stealthy movement among the branches of the shrubbery that swayed and rustled in the night wind upon the lawn.

The other candle-lit lanterns had long since gone out, and the one which had contained the necklace hung inert. Its once fiery dragon had become an indistinguishable design of inky black, but no one approached it either from within the house or without. Presently a club bus or two rattled up

to the door and departed with the orchestra, jazz band, and extra waiters and cooks. Later the members and their guests began to depart in their various cars, each group escorted to the steps by the constable.

A distant village clock struck three, and still the attorney's vigil remained unrelieved and unrewarded. With the departure of Mr. and Mrs. Dorrance, bearing the still hysterical Mrs. Sowerby, the constable came toward the watcher and announced: "Sheriff Coburn told me why you were out here, Mr. Estridge. He and Doc Fellowes reckon they'd rather have you in there with them now, being as it was you hired that city detective that got killed, and I'm going to take your place. Ain't seen anything suspicious, have you?"

Estridge assured the constable that he had not, and, relinquishing his commission and the weapon which was sagging down his coat pocket, he returned to the hall of the clubhouse. Here he found Rutherford Sowerby holding forth.

"This is an outrage! You people are only trying to show your petty authority by keeping us here, but I have an important directors' meeting in town in the morning, and I need my rest!"

"That's all right, sir!" the sheriff retorted pugnaciously. "You folks don't mind cutting up and

raising high jinks till morning when you're giving a party, but when it comes to a murder inquiry you're not to be kept out of your beds."

"'High jinks!'" The irate bank president was ready to explode. "I'll have you know that I've had gout for the past ten years! As for this murder, I know no more about it than you! I was playing bridge with three other members in the card room when the lights dimmed at midnight, and we had barely risen when the sound of the shot came. Samuel Estridge had taken command of the situation by the time I reached the veranda, and he asked me to go and telephone to O'Hare's Detective Agency in town and tell them that their man had been killed. I did so and then went to see that none of the chauffeurs or waiters left the premises. Good heavens! My estate in this one-horse village of yours is worth over sixty thousand dollars; you don't think I am likely to run away, do you?"

"I guess we can trust you, Mr. Sowerby," the coroner interposed smoothly. "We'll want you at the inquest, but you will be notified, and, if Sheriff Coburn agrees, we will excuse you now."

"I should like to take my wife home, also,"

Jack Fraser interrupted. "She was dancing with my brother, and I was dancing with Miss Dare when the signal came for the singing of 'Auld Lang Syne.' Neither of us left our partners' sides until the report of the shot. At least a score of people must have seen us."

"It is an imposition to keep the rest of the ladies here, anyway, at this hour!" Ogden Bowles declared hotly. "I'm not a member of the house committee, and I don't know why Grant was killed or who killed him, but the ladies, at least, should be exempt from this all-night grilling! Mrs. Carter, for instance, is really ill, and Mrs. de Forest and her niece——"

"Thank you, Mr. Bowles." From her chair, where by her very presence she seemed to dominate the group, Mrs. de Forest cast a withering glance upon him. "Neither my niece nor myself are of the weakly hysterical breed! I will speak for us both, and we will remain to see this inquiry through!"

Before any one could speak again the roar of a car with the muffler cut out sounded from the drive, and it drew up at the steps. Constable Meeks' slightly nasal tones came to them mingled with a quick authoritative masculine voice, and

then the door opened, and a slender, lithe young man strode into the room.

"I have motored out from the city in response to a telephone message from here," he announced. "My name is Renwick Crane."

CHAPTER VI

"MORE THAN ONE"

AS the newcomer mentioned his name, Sowerby and Bowles glanced at each other, and Estridge started eagerly forward. Even the sheriff uttered an exclamation beneath his breath. In the past year or two Renwick Crane had become celebrated for his success in the solving of more than one notoriously baffling crime, and the newspapers had sung his praises to the chagrin of the regular metropolitan police department. O'Hare had sent his star man to avenge the death of a lesser colleague.

"Mr. Crane, I believe we have met in court. I am Samuel Estridge." The attorney spoke hastily and turned toward the local officials. "I am sure that Coroner Fellowes and Sheriff Coburn will be delighted to have so distinguished a consultant. You have come, of course, to inquire into the circumstances of the death of your friend who was known among us as the house secretary,

James Grant. As the reason for his presence here has not been generally disclosed I propose that the coroner, the sheriff, Mr. Sowerby, and Mr. Fraser of the house committee, and you and I go into a brief, private session. If the rest of you will wait, I promise you that we shall not be long."

He led those whom he had named to the billiard room and closed the door. The others divided themselves insensibly into couples. Mrs. Jack Fraser seated herself beside Mrs. de Forest, and Alice Dare, after hovering about her aunt for a moment, retired to a discreet distance behind her chair, where she indulged in a whispered conversation with Gerald Landon. Ralph Fraser and Ogden Bowles were talking by the fireplace, and only Mrs. Carter sat alone and a little apart.

Her pale, almost classic, face between the bands of rich red hair was as expressionless as ever, and her slim hands were folded in her lap, but her lids drooped over her tawny eyes, and it seemed with difficulty that she essayed a faint smile when Bowles at length crossed to her side.

"You are utterly worn out!" he said. "It is a shame to keep you here after the shock of the tragedy, particularly as you are not well. I blame myself for persuading you to come this evening."

"Indeed you mustn't," she replied softly. "I am unnerved, of course, but it is of that poor man I am thinking, and of the strange mystery of his presence here. He was a detective, we know that, but I have heard of no robbery at the club, have you?"

Bowles shook his head. "It's bound to come out at the inquest, anyway, so I can't understand why the house committee are so secretive now. I shouldn't be surprised if the matter turned out to be more of a domestic scandal than a criminal affair," he said. "However, I'm not a he-gossip, and people don't kill for the mere sake of preserving a reputation!"

"Not without warning, even down where I came from," Mrs. Carter agreed. "It really does seem rather silly not to tell the members of the club why a detective was employed to spy upon them, especially now that the poor man is dead."

Behind locked doors in the billiard room, Rutherford Sowerby was voicing somewhat the same sentiment, but in less complimentary terms.

"As long as that old she-dragon's necklace has been recovered, I don't see why the whole story shouldn't be given to the boys of the press when they come swarming out in the morning!" he exclaimed. "I could have bought the thing for her

twice over, and now it has created the worst scandal a country club ever endured, aside from causing the death of that poor fellow, Doyle. Doctor Fellowes says he'll hold the inquest on Monday at the latest, and that is only two days off. This is Saturday morning."

"I want those two days." Renwick Crane spoke quietly, but with an intensity of purpose which brooked no denial. "Since the coroner and the sheriff have been good enough to give me a free hand in my own investigation and have agreed to coöperate with me in every way compatible with their offices, may I suggest that, until it is needed as evidence at the inquest, the dragon lantern be taken down with the other lanterns and put away as is usual after an entertainment? I have brought some of my own operatives with me from the agency, and one of them will watch any one who approaches that lantern until it is put in evidence. Your constable can be released for more important duty."

"But what could be more important?" asked Jack Fraser in surprise. "Surely when you get the man who had a guilty knowledge of the whereabouts of that necklace, you will have caught the murderer of James Doyle!"

"Not if he can present an alibi, which you are

unable to shake, for that minute of semidarkness during which the shot was fired!" Crane retorted, rumpling his curly brown hair. "Don't you see, gentlemen, that you've got merely the vaguest sort of circumstantial evidence as to why the murder was committed, but not even an idea of the possible identity of the murderer? I'm not out here to discover who stole that necklace or hid it in that lantern; I'm here to find out who killed Jim Doyle!"

His crisp, clear-cut tones broke slightly as he mentioned the name of his late associate, but his keen gray eyes flashed, and he set his jaw in no uncertain lines. The dominating force of the man's personality, together with his peculiar insight and power of deduction, which had gained him his reputation, began to be manifest even to the local authorities, and the sheriff exclaimed: "I never thought of that! There might have been more than one of them in the plot!"

"Doctor"—Crane turned to the coroner—"the most superficial examination of the wound should have shown the general direction from which the shot came."

"It did," Doctor Fellowes responded. "I told you that I wouldn't commit myself before the autopsy, but I have already given you my unoffi-

cial opinion, as I had previously given it to Mr. Estridge and the sheriff, that the shot was fired from a distance of twenty to forty feet, straight in front of Doyle. Of course it might have come from a little to the left or right, which would depend on how he was standing. Only the autopsy will show the depth of penetration and the course of the bullet—whether it was slightly upward or downward—but it undoubtedly passed through the open window before which he stood."

"That's good enough as a working basis." Crane's glance darted to the attorney. "Mr. Estridge, what architect designed this club?"

The unexpected question made the others eye each other in surprise, but, as though following the detective's train of thought, Estridge smiled as he replied: "Peter van Horn, of Hopping & van Horn, in the city. However, a copy of the plans of the club, drawn to scale, are filed in the secretary's office here, and I am sure that the rest of the house committee will be glad to place them at your disposal at any time."

"Thanks. Then suppose we join those of your members who are still being detained?" Crane suggested. "I noticed several ladies present, and, as Mr. Sowerby remarked before, it is nearly morning."

The cold light of dawn was indeed faintly streaking the east when they reëntered the hall to find the little groups much as they had left them, save that Alice Dare had fallen asleep on the bench that had been brought from the conservatory, Mrs. de Forest was nodding in her chair, and Mrs. Fraser pacing nervously back and forth. Of the women, only Mrs. Carter maintained her attitude of impassive, yet alert, calm. Crane, after discovering that the majority of the members and guests who had been detained were not in line with the window, dismissed them summarily. The sheriff turned to Mrs. Carter.

"Mrs. Carter, this is Mr. Crane, a detective, who has come out from town to look into the death of Mr. Grant."

Mrs. Carter bowed. "Mr. Crane's reputation has preceded him," she said demurely. "We did not know until to-night, however, that the poor man, whom we had all grown to like and trust as the new house secretary, was a detective also."

"You have no idea why he was here, Mrs. Carter?" asked Crane.

Her eyes widened. "I cannot imagine, but I suppose the house committee had some excellent reason. I have scarcely given that a thought. His death and the manner of it seem all a part of

some horrible dream, and yet I stood right there!"

"Where?"

"At the foot of the staircase. I was coming down from the ladies' rest room on the second floor, where I had gone to remain until the singing was over." She paused. "I had been out on the veranda and had seen and spoken to poor Mr. Grant—or whatever his name was—only a few minutes before. Oh, it is all too terrible to realize!"

"You were out on the veranda?" the detective repeated.

"Yes; I was waiting for Mr. Bowles to bring my cloak. I have not been well lately, and so much dancing had made me dizzy. I thought a breath of fresh air would do me good, but it was too cold out there, and I decided to go upstairs and rest until supper. I did go up and lie down during the final dance, but when the lights were turned out and the orchestra commenced the first bars of 'Auld Lang Syne,' I started down to join in the singing with the rest. I could see nothing but shadowy groups of people standing about and just the faintest glow from the lanterns on the veranda, and I had to feel my way to keep from falling. I had just reached the foot of the stairs when the sound of the shot came!"

She paused again with a shudder, but the detective inexorably urged her on.

"What did you see then, Mrs. Carter? What did you hear? What were your impressions?"

"I don't know!" She passed a hand across her eyes. "It was all confused, like some hideous phase of delirium! I remember a dreadful, crumpling sound as of something heavy and soft, falling—some woman screamed—it may have been I, but I was unconscious of it. I have a vague recollection of some man's voice calling for the lights to be turned on, and then they flashed suddenly in my eyes, and everybody rushed forward, but I couldn't move; I felt as though I had turned to stone! I don't know how long I stood there before Mr. Bowles came and told me that poor Mr. Grant had been shot—that he was dead! Then I collapsed, my limbs seemed to give way beneath me, and I sat down on the stairs. It was only gradually that I became aware that people were fainting and hysterical all about me. I was simply stunned. Really, that is all that I can tell you, Mr. Crane."

In spite of the repression, which it was evident that she had placed upon herself, her face appeared all at once drawn and haggard, and Renwick Crane, with a softening of his manner, said,

"Well, with the permission of the sheriff and the coroner, we won't trouble you any further, Mrs. Carter. You live near here?"

"Yes, scarcely a mile away, at the Horton Cottage. I shall be glad to receive you there at any time and give you any assistance in my power, but I really know nothing more than I have told you." She hesitated before she added: "But is Mr. Bowles going to take me home? He brought me to the dance last night in his car."

The eyes of the others turned involuntarily to the fireplace, before which Bowles stood with Ralph Fraser and Gerald Landon, and an added tension made itself manifest in the air. As though conscious of it himself, the broker unconsciously squared his shoulders as he advanced, and, although he smiled with an assumption of ease, his eyes shifted slightly before he met the detective's gaze.

"By Jove, I believe Estridge, Landon, and myself are the only ones left who haven't given an account of ourselves yet for those fateful moments when the lights were out!" he exclaimed with a laugh. "Estridge, of course, is out of it."

"I should think he was!" said Sowerby, glaring. "I've known Sam Estridge all my life, and, more-

over, he was in the card room watching a bridge game when the shot was fired. I would have been out on the veranda myself as quick as he was if it hadn't been for my gout and the fact that some fool woman got in my way!"

"And I," said Bowles, "can attest to Mr. Landon's presence here in the main hall. Doubtless a score of others can give the same testimony." Bowles' smile had become less strained. "I saw him, but whether he saw me or not I don't know. I was standing alone in the door leading to the smaller supper room—that one over there, to the right of the steward's desk. Mrs. Carter had promised me the final dance before the singing, and, when at the last moment she decided that she must go upstairs and rest until supper, I told her that I would be waiting for her at the foot of the stairs after the singing. She was to go in to supper with me. During the final dance I went into the smaller supper room to see that our table had been arranged, and, when the jazz music abruptly ceased and the string orchestra started up the introduction to 'Auld Lang Syne,' I came to the door to add my voice to the general chorus. It was then that I saw Mr. Landon standing in the conservatory door opposite. I remained

where I was until the sound of the shot came. Then I rushed out upon the veranda with the rest."

There was a slight pause, and then, as it was broken by neither the sheriff nor the coroner, Renwick Crane asked: "You live here in Brooklands, Mr. Bowles?"

"No, I merely run out occasionally and put up here at the club if there is room; if not, at the Brooklands Inn. I am a broker with offices in Wall Street and a bachelor apartment in town at the Margrave. I shall hold myself unreservedly at your service and that of the authorities here." He paused and added with his old, easy manner: "As a member of this club, I feel as deeply as any of the rest can the fact that this poor fellow came to his death in the performance of his duty, even though I was not in the confidence of the house committee and I did not dream that he was other than he appeared."

"Well," the sheriff remarked after a glance at the coroner who nodded, "I guess, if Mr. Crane don't want to ask you any more questions just now, we won't keep you longer from taking Mrs. Carter home. Did you notice Mr. Bowles, Mr. Landon?"

"No, I was watching the dancers, but I'm

mighty glad he saw me, for I, too, was alone," the young man responded frankly. "I ran out on the veranda with the rest when Grant was shot, and Mr. Estridge, who had taken charge, asked me to call Mr. Sowerby. I am employed in town in the bank of which Mr. Sowerby is president. I am not a member of this club, but a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Fraser, with whom I am staying."

"Since every one now present has accounted for himself or has been accounted for, may I suggest that all may be permitted to leave?" Samuel Estridge remarked. "Mr. Crane will be accommodated here at the club, of course, and it may be that you gentlemen would like to question the stewards and other attendants."

He turned to the sheriff and coroner, and, after a brief consultation between them, the latter announced: "Mr. Estridge is right. All of you are well known to me, and most of you are my patients; I think I can depend upon your presence at the inquest. Sheriff Coburn and I represent the county authorities, and Mr. Crane is working with us. I know you'll give him all the assistance you can, and in the meantime we won't detain you any longer."

During the bustle of departure which ensued, Crane observed that Mrs. de Forest made an

almost imperceptible gesture toward him and then walked into the ladies' cloak room, imperiously waving back her niece. Mrs. Fraser was already wrapped in her cloak, and Bowles was solicitously assisting Mrs. Carter with hers in the foyer. The detective, as unobtrusively as possible, managed to slip away. He followed the elderly woman and found her alone.

"Shut the door!" she commanded without preamble, and, when he had complied, she faced him before the long mirror. "Young man, the sheriff is a good detective of chicken thieves, and as a coroner, Doctor Fellowes may be efficient in ordinary cases, but I've heard of you and some of the things which you have accomplished, and I'm going to trust you."

"Thank you, Mrs. de Forest," he responded with immense respect. "Do you mean that you heard or saw something which you have not mentioned? Have you a possible theory as to who shot my former associate?"

"I've lived too long to form theories about anything, and you needn't thank me until you learn how trivial a supposition I have to suggest to you!" she retorted. "I caught only a glimpse of the body on the veranda. The sound of the shooting had stunned me for a moment, and I

was slow in rising from my chair; I had scarcely reached the door when Mr. Estridge ordered everybody back, and I was not sorry. I am not squeamish ordinarily, but neither have I any hysterically morbid tendencies, and I had no desire to look upon the result of a tragedy for which I felt indirectly responsible. It was on my behalf that your unfortunate colleague was engaged to come here."

She paused, and the detective, who had not shifted his gaze from her face, seized quickly upon one salient phrase which she had used.

"You say 'the sound of the shooting,' Mrs. de Forest," he repeated. "I understood that only one shot was fired."

Mrs. de Forest's stately shoulders rose in a slight shrug.

"So they tell me," she replied. "As I have just informed you, I did not catch more than a glimpse of poor Mr. Grant's body, but I gathered from the gruesome details imparted to me that there was but one wound. Nevertheless, although I am getting on in years, Mr. Crane, my senses are, I think, still unimpaired, and I fancied—I could almost have sworn—that two distinct, but practically simultaneous, detonations rang through the rotunda. It may have been merely the echo,

of course, the effect of the acoustics, or just an old woman's notion. I offer it to you for what it may be worth."

"And I accept it most gratefully," Renwick Crane assured her in a very sober tone. "I shall not betray your confidence, but I will give the possibility you have suggested my fullest attention. It may be that more than one person was concerned in the theft of your necklace, and more than one person in the murder of Jim Doyle!"

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN IN THE BUSHES

WHEN O'Hare's star detective finally escorted Mrs. de Forest back to the entrance hall they found it occupied solely by the latter's niece. Alice Dare rose sleepily at their approach.

"Are you ready to go home now, auntie?" she asked in the dazed accents of a child suddenly awakened. "The car's been waiting for ever so long."

"Then it can wait a few minutes longer!" the elderly lady retorted tartly. "Alice, this is Mr. Crane. He has come out to investigate the death of that other detective. My niece, Alice Dare."

The sleepy look vanished all at once from the girl's eyes. In its place there came a swift gleam of apprehension, but she responded to the introduction and added hesitatingly: "It—it was terrible, of course, Mr. Crane! I do hope you will be able to find out who did it. How could any one——"

"Alice!" her aunt interrupted her. "I managed to keep my eyes on you most of the evening, but I couldn't locate you every minute in the crowd that was here. Where were you standing when the lights were lowered for the singing at midnight?"

"Auntie!" Horrified incredulity sharpened the girl's tones. "Surely you and—and Mr. Crane don't think that I saw anything! Wouldn't I have told? I had the last dance with Mr. Jack Fraser, and when the clock struck twelve and the music stopped so abruptly, we halted over there, just between the doors of the billiard room and the entrance of the conservatory. We stood there together, my hand still tucked in his arm, and sang with the rest until—until that awful shot came. Mrs. Jack and Mr. Ralph Fraser were just beside us."

"Let me see." Renwick Crane gazed speculatively across the big, almost circular hall. "If you stood near the door of the billiard room, Miss Dare, only the door of the secretary's office and the hall leading to the rear separated you from the main staircase. In that case, you, your partner, and the other couple were not at an acute angle from the window there, where the dragon lantern hung. Although you were not in a direct

line with it, of course, had you any idea, any impression of the direction from which the shot was fired?"

"Why, no!" she said. "I didn't even know it was a shot until the lights went up and everybody rushed out on the veranda! I was carried along with the crowd, but I didn't realize what had happened. If any impression came to me at all it was that the noise was outside—the back-firing of one of the cars or a bursting tire. Couldn't the shot have come from out there, somewhere? It seemed to sort of echo."

Mrs. de Forest darted a quick glance at the detective, but his face remained impassive.

"Anything is possible at this stage of the investigation, Miss Dare," he responded. Then, turning to the older woman, he added: "I will not detain you ladies any longer. May I escort you to your car? You must both be very tired, and I have much to do in the next few hours."

When he reëntered the deserted hall, Crane paused for a time on the threshold. Meditatively he surveyed the main staircase directly opposite, the two small offices—one open, one so significantly closed—which flanked it, and the various doors and alcove entrances to other rooms of the club.

Drawing an envelope and pencil from his pocket, he made a rapid sketch, placing crosses and initials here and there. With a satisfied nod he returned them to his pocket just as the coroner appeared in the hall leading to the rear.

"I thought you had gone, doctor," he remarked. "I've just got rid of the last of the club members who were here when I arrived. I presume you have depositions from those who had already left?"

"The sheriff and I got what we could from them, but it wasn't much—mostly hysteria on the part of the women and a muddle of conflicting and unwanted opinions on the part of the men," Doctor Fellowes replied. "With the exception of a Mr. and Mrs. Dorrance and Mrs. Sowerby, those you met were the only ones, as far as we have been able to discover, Mr. Crane, who seemed capable of giving us any assistance in our investigation. The only members or guests, I mean. Murdock, the steward, was behind his desk—there to the left of the staircase. I've just come from having a little talk with him."

"I should like to interview him myself if it is not too late," remarked Crane. "Those three members of the house committee have gone home, I suppose?"

Doctor Fellowes chuckled. "Mr. Fraser took his wife home, and his brother accompanied him, but old President Sowerby wouldn't budge a foot until they telephoned from his house that his wife was in hysterics. He went then, all right, but you could hear him swearing all down the drive. His voice covered the noise of his car. He's afraid he'll miss something, or Lawyer Estridge will get in ahead of him on the investigation."

"Is Mr. Estridge still here?"

"Yes. He is waiting in the billiard room for a word with you when you have finished interviewing the witnesses. Murdock will stay up until Mr. Bowles returns. He'll show you to your room and see that you are comfortable. He's an odd character—that steward," the coroner added reflectively. "I've known him around here ever since the club was built, and I can't make him out. Anybody can see that he's taking what happened last night mighty hard, and yet, for all that, he doesn't forget a detail of his duties. He appears to be half man and half machine."

"Oh, well, if he is going to tuck me in to-night—or rather, this morning—I won't bother to talk to him now. I think I'll see what Mr. Estridge wants with me and then turn in for an hour.

I suppose that Murdock is not in solitary charge?"

Doctor Fellowes responded to the implied question with simple directness.

"Sheriff Coburn is on the job, and he has an eye on him as well as on all the rest within doors. I think you must have seen the constable on the porch out there just now. We've no more occasion to suspect Murdock than any one else in the building. I'm bound to tell you, Mr. Crane, that we've searched the club from top to bottom, and we can't afford to take chances on anybody leaving it now, who either belongs here or might have sneaked in past the guards in the grounds. Well, I'll get on home and to bed for an hour or two before the autopsy."

"Before you do perform it, doctor, I wish you'd phone to me up here at the club. I want to come down and have a look at the body as it was when you first saw it," Crane said earnestly. "I'm not asking this for sentimental reasons alone, though I liked Jim, and we'd worked on many a case together, but because it may help me in my own investigation. We are not rivals, you know, sir, but partners—you and the sheriff and I—and it is not my chief's wish or mine to have me appear

in the case at all. The only thing we are after is to find out who murdered Jim Doyle and have the guilty party get what's coming to him or to them."

The coroner held out his hand. "I'm sure of that, Mr. Crane, and I'll be glad to phone to you in time. If you and your chief want to avenge the death of one of your own men, Sheriff Coburn and I—even more than the members of this club—because we're natives here—want to find out the truth and clear the name of the village as well as the club of Broadlawns. I guess we can work together, all right! Good night, or rather, good morning!"

The genial doctor departed, and Crane turned thoughtfully toward the billiard room. Within, stretched out upon one of the wide leather seats, which divided the wall space with the cue racks, he found Samuel Estridge. The lawyer's eyes were closed and his hands were peacefully relaxed at his sides.

Thinking that the other was asleep, the detective was about to retreat, but Estridge opened his eyes and arose. "Have you finished with the witnesses, Crane?" he asked. "I don't want to urge you to tell me anything that you would prefer to

keep to yourself at this time. I haven't waited here to bother you with my half-baked theories, but to offer you any possible assistance that I can. As the secretary of the club and one of its old members, I may be able to help you with the identity and the position of the members. Murdock, the steward, can furnish you with a list of the entire club membership, and the coroner, being the general medical practitioner of the neighborhood, could probably tell you a great deal about their idiosyncrasies, but——"

He paused suggestively, and Crane smiled and finished for him. "But he represents the local authorities, at least until the inquest. I do not think he could tell me anything, Mr. Estridge, that would be of material assistance to me at this stage of my investigation, but you can help me a lot if you will. Just who, for instance, are the Frasers?"

"Thoroughly good people in every way," replied the attorney emphatically. "I'd vouch for them personally any time. Jack Fraser is manager of the Mexamer Oil Company's New York branch, and his wife is a fine little woman. They have lived out here for six or seven years."

"And Mr. Jack Fraser's brother?" pursued Crane.

"He's something of a stranger here, the guest of the Jack Frasers. Ralph Fraser comes from Texas, and President Sowerby likes him; he's had some dealings with him at the bank. He seems to be all right." Estridge paused suddenly and then added: "He might be of some technical assistance to you, for I understand that he is quite an amateur enthusiast about weapons of all kinds, especially firearms."

"I may call upon him. What about the young girl—the niece of Mrs. de Forest—she is an heiress, isn't she?" asked the detective perfunctorily.

Estridge smiled in his turn.

"On the contrary, the child is an orphan without a penny of her own, but, according to present indications, she will not be dependent upon her aunt for long. That good-looking Landon boy, who is a house guest of the Frasers, has a responsible position in Sowerby's bank and—but I'm talking like a gossipy, romantic old maid!" He shrugged good-naturedly. "Anybody else I can tip you off about?"

"I haven't interviewed Murdock yet, but the coroner says he is an odd sort of character," Crane remarked.

The attorney eyed him keenly for a minute. "We've always found Murdock straight enough,"

he said at last. "He's a taciturn person, but there has never been any criticism as to the way he performed his duties. Beyond that I do not believe that we've thought much about him, one way or another."

"I see," Crane replied. "Do the other people whom I interviewed to-night all belong to the club? The red-haired lady, Mrs. Carter, for one instance?"

"Yes. She came here two or three years ago from the South and bought the Horton cottage." Once more Estridge's gaze narrowed. "As I told you, I do not want to force your confidence, Crane, but why do you ask about these people in particular?"

"I am going to take you into my confidence, Mr. Estridge." The detective spoke frankly. "Preposterous as it may appear to mention any of them in connection with the case, I have discovered so far in my investigation six people, and only six, who, from their positions alone, could have fired through that window before which the dragon lantern hung. It is possible, of course, that some one may have crouched in the rear hall beside the main staircase and after shooting have retreated in the direction of the kitchen and pan-

tries, but we must take up the more obvious suppositions first. Murdock was behind his desk, and Mrs. Carter on the staircase."

The attorney frowned. "Except in your ordinary routine I think Mrs. Carter may safely be eliminated, but you spoke of six persons. Who were the other four?"

"The two Fraser brothers and Mrs. Jack Fraser with little Miss Dare stood here, near the door of the billiard room. This room, as you know, is separated by the secretary's locked door and the narrow rear hall from the main staircase. These are the only people I have as yet found who were within a radius of that window."

Samuel Estridge paced thoughtfully across the room. When he turned the frown had disappeared, and his face resumed its wonted impassivity, as though a mask had fallen over it, obliterating all expression.

"I am glad that we are speaking confidentially, Mr. Crane, for you can realize that I am in rather a delicate position as one of the house committee," he remarked smoothly. "As I told you I have no possible theory to offer, but may I voice a suggestion? Is there a chance that the shot which killed Doyle might have been intended for another? I

mean, could he have been mistaken in the shadows outside the window for some one else?"

The detective shook his head. "The bullet which killed Jim Doyle was intended for him alone," he responded decidedly. "It is a pity that you yourself were not nearer than the cardroom at that moment, Mr. Estridge. I should like to have had your opinion of the sound of that shot!"

"There were many other people in the rotunda at the time," Estridge remarked. "It appears almost a miracle that the bullet should have threaded its way among them to the window, but I presume that, when the dancing stopped, they insensibly divided into little groups and backed against the wall, leaving the center of the hall clear. You haven't interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Philip Dorrance, or Mrs. Rutherford Sowerby. They were permitted to depart before your arrival. But, I believe, they were also in the rotunda when the lights were lowered for the singing. Then there is another guest of the club, Ogden Bowles—but I forgot. He was standing in the door of the smaller supper room, out of range, wasn't he?"

There was a wearied note in the attorney's tones, but it was now Crane's turn to regard the

other sharply. In court Estridge had never been known to let the most minor and irrelevant detail of a case slip his alert mind. What the detective read in his countenance, however, was merely a look of blank fatigue, and he decided that there was nothing further to be gained by prolonging the interview.

"I'll see the rest of them later, and, in the meantime, I won't detain you now, Mr. Estridge. I've got to have a talk with Murdock and then get an hour's sleep before I tackle the job again."

"I have a small cottage near here where I keep bachelor's hall. Any one can direct you to it. If you care to come to me in strict confidence, as you have just now, I shall be glad to give you the assistance of any information which may occur to me." The attorney held out his hand. "Until I see you again, Mr. Crane."

The village constable had long since ceased his vigil when the two emerged upon the veranda, and the dragon lantern, in common with all the others, had vanished. Before the window where it had hung, instead of the sinister crimson stain, there now appeared a freshly scrubbed space upon the floor, which glistened in a ray of the morning sun, and the steward arose from his knees at their

approach. He seemed as little disconcerted, as though the brush and pail were his usual implements of employment, but he addressed himself apologetically to the attorney.

"None of the servants would touch this, sir, and, after taking down the lanterns, I thought best——"

"You took down the lanterns?" Estridge asked.

"Just now, sir." The deprecation deepened in his tone. "It should have been done before, but a person from the village told me he had orders that nothing was to be disturbed, indoors or out."

"Ah, quite right; that was the constable, no doubt." Estridge turned to Crane and, indicating the steward, announced: "This is Murdock. He will show you to your room and answer any questions you may choose to put to him."

Murdock bowed slightly. "Mr. Crane's room is ready for him, sir. The coroner told me to have it prepared." He seemed scarcely to glance at the detective, but addressed himself once more to the attorney. "Here is your car being brought around now, sir. Mr. Bowles returned a few moments ago and retired at once, but he instructed me to awaken him if he could be of any service to you."

"He cannot. I am going home and follow his example, Murdock. So long, Mr. Crane, and good luck." Estridge descended the steps and was climbing into his car when a subdued hubbub arose from around the east corner of the veranda, and a man appeared, his bulldog features alive with excitement.

"Mr. Estridge! Stop a minute, sir! There's been more dirty work here last night! One of our boys, that was stationed on the lawn on that side of the house, is lying in a clump of bushes with a gash on the back of his head that you could put your two fingers in!"

Estridge started back as Crane descended the steps. The detective explained, a slight tremble for once manifest in his level tones, "It is one of the special men I had sent out from the city for last night. He isn't dead, Saunders?"

"No, but he's dead to the world!" Saunders responded. "He's laid out with one of the nastiest swipes I ever saw, and I'm blessed if I know how any one could have got to him and hit him hard enough with this to lay his head open!"

As he spoke he held out in the palm of his hand something which glittered in the sun, and the attorney motioned to Crane to take it. The latter complied, and, after an instant's glance at it, he

and Estridge gazed at each other in wordless questioning.

The object which the detective held was a tiny pistol almost as small as a toy, but upon its highly-polished barrel appeared a dark blotch; the second sinister indication they were to behold of that night's work.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE BOXWOOD BUSHES

"GO and call the sheriff, Murdock!" Estridge turned with a start to where the steward stood gaping at them from the veranda. Then to Saunders he added: "Show Mr. Crane and myself where he is. Which one of the boys is it? Who found him?"

Saunders stared at the mention of the private detective's name. Rousing himself he replied to the last question first.

"I did, sir. The head cook was having us in the kitchen in relays for some hot coffee, and I went looking for Pete Lindsay—that's who it is. He was on the stand for you in the Lockwood case. I knew about where he'd been stationed last night, and I called, but got no answer, and finally I see the two feet of him sticking out from underneath these bushes."

While he talked Saunders had led them around

the corner of the club house to a clump of ancient boxwood. Here, on the edge of the driveway, a short, stocky figure lay motionless. The man's broad, freckled face was upturned in the sunlight, and his arms were extended helplessly above his head.

"I dragged him out by the feet, just after your car passed around to the front, Mr. Estridge," explained Saunders. "The little toy pistol was winking up at me from the grass, and I picked it up, and then, as I turn Pete over and see that he was still breathing, I didn't stop to call for anybody, but I ran to catch you before you should beat it away."

"He was lying squarely on his back in the bushes?" Crane spoke for the first time.

"No, on his side. His feet was kind of twisted one over the other." Saunders glanced again at the tiny weapon in the detective's grasp. "It must have taken a guy with an arm like a pile driver to crown him and lay him out cold with that toy thing, let alone to sneak up on him from behind through those thick bushes."

"That is just what I was thinking," Crane remarked. Thrusting the pistol into his hip pocket, he suddenly dived into the mass of shrubbery, just as Sheriff Coburn appeared on the run, the

anxious-eyed Murdock trotting discreetly in the rear. Between them they carried the unconscious man into the clubhouse and placed him on the steward's bed. Estridge went to the private telephone booth in the locker room to summon Doctor Fellowes.

In the excitement none of them had observed the fact that the detective had not accompanied them within doors. As the attorney emerged from the booth he found Crane awaiting him.

"What do you think of this latest development, Mr. Estridge?" the latter asked.

"Frankly I am almost past the stage of coherent thought!" Estridge responded. "I have handled many a bizarre case in court in my time, but this outranks them all! Of course that terrific blow on Lindsay's head could never have been caused by the tiny weapon which Saunders found, no matter what strength lay behind it—that is a foregone conclusion."

"Not if the pistol were used to strike with, perhaps, but suppose it had been thrown?"

"What?"

"A missile as light and small as that, if flung from a distance and—let us say—a height of one story from the ground, might have caused such a wound, provided that Lindsay's back was turned

to the house and his head uncovered." Then, as the attorney still stared, Crane continued: "If he were lighting his pipe, contrary to orders, and had taken off his cap to shield the flame of the match that pistol thrown at random from one of the upper windows might well have found an unintentional mark."

"Great heavens!" Estridge exclaimed. "But who was upstairs?"

"I should very much like to know who was on the second floor when the lights were lowered at midnight, or who might have slipped past Mrs. Carter on the stairs, immediately after the shot was fired." There was a note of added seriousness in the detective's tones. "I found these in the bushes just now. They must have dropped from Lindsay's hands as he fell." From his coat pocket he drew a crumpled cap, sodden with dew, a pipe with a small quantity of unlighted tobacco still adhering to the bottom of the bowl, and a thin packet of matches.

"But could any one have passed Mrs. Carter on the stairs without her knowledge?" Estridge asked. "On the other hand, if some one were already on the second floor when the lights were lowered, how could they have shot Doyle below on the veranda?"

"Mrs. Carter has stated that the sound of the shooting dazed and numbed her faculties. In such a condition some one might have slipped past in either direction, for the staircase is wide, remember," Crane replied. "If any one were hiding upstairs, awaiting that moment, they could have crept down a few steps, fired, and then retreating, thrown the pistol from an upper window. If the autopsy shows that the bullet took a sharply downward course and was of a caliber to fit this tiny weapon the conclusion is inevitable."

He produced the pistol once more, and Estridge exclaimed impatiently:

"We're getting nowhere, man! Nothing but a series of suppositions. An examination of this pistol should show whether a shot had been fired from it, and how recently. Then, when the owner of it is discovered, or at least the identity of the person in whose possession it was last seen, the matter will be fairly obvious. Only one bullet was fired at Doyle."

The detective smiled slightly. "You heard it merely as a muffled report, Mr. Estridge; that is a pity. One witness has already voiced the opinion that two distinct detonations, so close together as to be almost simultaneous, rang through the rotunda, and that witness was unconsciously cor-

roborated by another who said that the shot seemed to 'echo.' One cartridge only has been fired within the last few hours from this pistol, but was it the bullet which killed Doyle? Here is Doctor Fellowes in his car. While he attends to your man, Lindsay, I think I will just have a look about the second floor."

The doctor found the second victim of the night suffering from a bad scalp wound, but already conscious.

"What hit me?" the latter repeated faintly over and over. "I didn't see nothin', nor hear a step. All of a sudden somethin' fetched me a crack, and what little light there was went out for fair!"

"You are sure you didn't hear anything?" Samuel Estridge insisted, as Doctor Fellowes deftly dressed the wound. "I don't mean a step behind you, when you turned to light your pipe, contrary to orders, Lindsay, but a sound of any sort, in or near the clubhouse, other than the music and singing."

The man made a sheepish grimace of admission.

"I don't know how you found out about my pipe, Mr. Estridge, but my throat was parched for a smoke. I heard the song stop with a bang and a lot of women hollerin', but they'd been makin' a racket all the evenin', and you couldn't

tell whether they was laughin' or cryin'. I'd had my orders not to interfere, and I thought it was all part of the fun. I turned my back to light up for just a minute when somethin' crowned me."

"You heard no other sound?" Estridge's tones had taken on a deeper note. "Just an instant before you were struck, I mean. Think, Lindsay!"

Lindsay contracted that part of his brow which was visible from beneath the bandage in a painful effort at concentration. "Seems to me there was a kind of a scraping noise, but I supposed it was the branches of trees rubbin' together. I ain't used to country sounds, and I didn't think nothin' of it."

In the meantime the detective had hastened up the staircase. The main upper hall ran the entire width of the clubhouse, with a window at each end. Lesser halls branched off from it toward the rear, and around the gallery to the front were the ladies' dressing and cloakrooms. Crane gave a cursory glance into one or two of the rooms which lined the back corridors and were evidently for the use of transient guests. Then he turned his attention to the windows. That at the left end of the hall was closed, but the other had been opened, and the detective walked quickly over to it and glanced out. As he had expected, it looked

directly down upon the driveway from the garage and the clump of boxwood before which Lindsay had been stationed. It would not have taken a particularly muscular throw or deliberate aim to have struck him that blow, even had he had time to light the match and reveal his presence by its flare. If the pistol had been flung blindly straight from the window it could scarcely have avoided hitting him.

The cloakrooms, which Crane entered next, were a disordered litter of fans, handkerchiefs, and small fancy receptacles for carrying cosmetics. The pillows on the couch in one of the dressing rooms were deeply indented, showing that some had rested there for a part of the previous evening at least.

Nothing further of significance rewarding his efforts, the detective descended the staircase to find Murdock hovering about its foot.

"I've some coffee and toast here for you, sir," the latter announced, wetting his thin lips nervously as he spoke. He appeared older by ten years than on the previous night, and the gray at his temples was more evident in the broad light of day.

"Thank you, Murdock." Crane seated himself at the little table, and, as the other served him, he

added: "I understand from Mr. Estridge that you have been here a long time."

"Since the club was built, sir; that's what makes it so awful—what happened last night—aside from the shock about poor Mr. Grant. There's never been a hint of a scandal, never even a hitch in any of the entertainments, nor a complaint from a single member that was serious enough to be laid before a meeting of the board, let alone the suspicion of a crime, until last evening. I shouldn't wonder if it would entirely disrupt the club, and I was as proud of it as a member himself could have been!" Murdock, the silent, had suddenly waxed loquacious, but his tones were still habitually deferential. "From the very day that Mr. Grant came to take the place of Mr. Martin I am sure that none of the members nor club attendants had the slightest idea that he was anything more than the house secretary he pretended to be—except, of course, those who engaged him. I cannot imagine even yet why a detective should have been installed here, but as to his murder——"

"Go on!" Crane commanded tersely as the other hesitated.

"Well, sir, I know it's not my place to offer an opinion, especially to a person—er—a gentle-

man of your experience in such cases, but couldn't that have been the work of an outsider, some one who, perhaps, had a private grudge against him? With the crowd that was here last night there would be plenty of chance for a stranger to slip in and out unnoticed, even though I was behind my office desk there all the time."

"You were there when the shot was fired?" Crane ignored the suggestion.

"Yes, sir. I remember that one of the hired waiters tried to pass from the rear hall to the supper room in the midst of the singing, and I was just reaching out to stop him when the sound of the shot came."

Crane turned and regarded the broad desk top reflectively, then once more gazed at his informant.

"You stretched out your hand to touch this waiter from behind your desk?"

Murdock flushed but replied promptly: "No, sir. Now and again the gentlemen members leave their golf bags in my office, instead of taking them back to their lockers; there are usually two or three of them there, just as there were last night. When that waiter started to pass I was afraid he would disturb the singing, so I fumbled at random in one of the bags at my feet, picked out a golf

club and was trying to tap him on the arm with it when the shot rang out. The club was still in my hand when I vaulted over the desk top—I was too much excited to remember the little swinging door—and ran out on the veranda with the others. I didn't see from what direction the shot came, and I hadn't even noticed Mr. Grant at the window there until we found him lying dead. Then Mr. Estridge sent me to collect the extra cooks and waiters and regular attendants in the billiard room until the sheriff and coroner should come. That's really all I can tell you, sir."

"Did you notice any one move after the singing started, except that waiter?" Crane asked.

"No, sir." For once Murdock raised his eyes and gazed straight into those of the detective. "I was thinking of them the song was intended for. They were all gentlemen whom I'd served for years, and who wouldn't be coming back to the club, ever."

Crane pushed back his chair and rose. "Let me see inside that office of yours; I'd like to know just where you were standing when you heard the shot."

Without a word Murdock turned, folded back the hinged top of the counter and, opening the narrow, gatelike door, ushered his visitor inside.

"Here, sir. I was standing right here and the waiter was there between me and the newel post when I reached down."

"Into a golf bag at your feet, I think you said, Murdock!" The detective's tones had suddenly crisped. "Where is that bag now? There is only a shelf of ledgers under the counter."

Murdock stared down stupidly. "Why, it's gone!" he exclaimed. "I'm positive there were three, for I had to move two for room to stand. Yes, there they are—one in front of my little safe and the other under the letter rack. The gentleman who owned the third must have taken it home with him when he went, and he'll miss his stick. I left it in the billiard room or somewhere about, in the excitement."

He had once more become the well-trained servant, and his distress at such a trivial error would have been almost comical under other circumstances.

"Never mind about the stick!" Crane said impatiently. "This club member must have been a very enthusiastic golfer to remember his bag at such a time! Who was he?"

"I don't know, sir." A suspicion of a shrug lifted Murdock's lean shoulders. "If I'm busy

somewhere else they just drop their bags over the counter, and this one may have belonged to a guest of one of the members. I couldn't even tell you who owns those other two."

It was at this juncture that the coroner made his reappearance from the room where, in his capacity as physician, he had attended Lindsay. Seeing the detective, he exclaimed: "Oh, there you are, Crane! Been looking for you. Thought you'd like to ride down to the village with me; you mentioned it, if you remember."

"Thank you, doctor, I should." Crane emerged from behind the steward's desk. "Murdock, while I'm gone you might find that golf club you spoke of and see if you can identify its owner by it. Now, doctor."

But, as they descended the veranda steps to Doctor Fellowes' waiting car, an alert-eyed young man arose from a garden bench and came forward.

"Man about forty, gray hair at temples, walks like a cat; know him, Mr. Crane?" he asked without preamble.

"I know him," the detective responded briefly.

"Took 'em down, without looking inside one, and carried 'em into the house heaped up in his arms, as careless as though they were a bundle of

straw. Same man you found scrubbing up under the window later, but he didn't look around. Nothing more doing since."

"All right, Jewett. Go around to the back and get some breakfast; say I sent you. When I return I'll have further instructions for you." Crane followed the mystified doctor into the car, and, as they rattled down the drive to the open road, he added to the latter: "That was one of the operatives from our own agency whom I brought out from town. He relieved your constable in his watch over the dragon lantern. You are going to perform the autopsy now?"

"Yes. There's no doubt, of course, that the man was killed with that pistol which was found beside the body of the man I have just attended. I understand that you have it, Mr. Crane, and I'll want it as evidence at the inquest."

"It is in my pocket now, and I will turn it over to you as soon as we reach your house, if you like," Crane said. "It's almost as small as a toy."

"Small enough for a woman to use, eh?" asked the other.

"Quite," Crane acquiesced gravely. "Or for a man, either, if he wanted to throw suspicion upon a woman."

The doctor glanced up quickly, but he made no comment until they reached his home where, in a small outbuilding, he conducted the few autopsies he had been called upon to perform.

"Come into the house for a minute," he said. "I want to get my instruments—— Hang it! There's some one in the office! I can't be bothered with patients now."

But the big, broad-shouldered, keen-eyed man of thirty-five or more, who arose at their entrance, proved to be no patient.

"Hello, coroner!" he exclaimed in bluff, hearty tones. "My brother, Jack, suggested that I drop in to see if I could be of any assistance to you, shooting irons being my middle name. Mr. Crane, I guess you saw me in that bunch at the club a few hours ago, though you didn't put me through any third degree. I'm Ralph Fraser."

The detective nodded pleasantly. "I remember you, Mr. Fraser. Doctor, if you will just let me have a look at the body, I'll come back and talk to your guest here until you have finished the autopsy, or until you need him."

He accompanied the coroner to the little outbuilding, examined the body of his late associate without visible expression of other than professional interest, and then returned to the office.

Ralph Fraser was pacing the worn strip of carpet, his huge, well-knit bulk seeming to fill the narrow confines of the room.

He paused expectantly, and Crane placed his hat on the table and then seated himself.

"Rotten affair, that!" Fraser observed with an expressive gesture toward the window, through which the little white-washed building was visible. "I was right in the hall, not thirty feet from where the poor fellow stood out on the veranda, and yet I couldn't have told the direction from which the shot came!"

"That is a puzzling matter to determine sometimes," Crane responded, and then abruptly switched the subject from the present and its attendant circumstances. He alluded to Fraser's adopted State and its resources until the coroner rejoined them. "What's the verdict, doctor?" he asked quickly before Fraser could speak. "I don't mean the details—they will keep until the inquest. If it isn't asking too much would you mind telling us in confidence what caliber bullet killed Doyle?"

"A thirty-two," responded the coroner gravely.

The result of his disclosure was extraordinary. Fraser sprang from his chair, and his strong voice rose almost to a shout. "What! Say that again,

will you, doc? You're dead certain that it was a thirty-two?"

For answer the coroner held out in his palm a tiny, steel-coated object. Fraser seized and eagerly examined it. Then, with a smothered ejaculation, he returned it, and, dropping back into his chair once more, he passed his handkerchief hastily across his forehead.

"Mr. Fraser"—Renwick Crane's incisive tones cut the tension in the air like the thrust of a knife—"what do you know of this? With what size bullet did you think Doyle had been killed? Did you think it was the other shot? The shot that missed?"

CHAPTER IX

THE CURIOSITY OF MRS. SOWERBY

THE coroner was the first to find his voice.

"Do you mean to say, Crane, that two shots were fired at Doyle?"

"I have a witness or two who can testify that such is their personal opinion, which appears to have been corroborated by Mr. Fraser's surprise just now." The detective turned to the latter who still sat as though dazed. "I believe you had a very definite reason for assuming that a bullet other than a thirty-two killed my colleague. Will you tell us what that reason was?"

Fraser roused himself and squared his shoulders. "No reason except an instinctive conviction based on my own knowledge of firearms," he responded with a show of his former frank, hearty manner. "I told you a little while ago that I couldn't tell the exact direction from which the shot came; that was perfectly true, owing to the acoustics of the rotunda, but it is also true that

I was absolutely certain, from the volume of sound, that the weapon used must have been a thirty-eight."

"Yet, surely, you heard, from the coroner's preliminary examination of the body, that the wound was caused by a bullet of very small caliber," Crane declared.

"Gentlemen, I am a stranger here, not a member of the country club, but a guest of my brother." Fraser smiled slightly as he rose. "Down where I come from it isn't healthy for an outside party to set up his opinion against that of the folks in charge, and I thought, of course, that the autopsy would prove my conviction to be the correct one. That is why I dropped around this morning, and why I was so surprised just now to find that my judgment had been at fault. I must apologize to the doctor here for thinking that I knew more than he did about it, but I didn't have a glimpse of the wound, you know. I guess you wouldn't take much stock in any help I might offer you, after making such a bull as that, Doctor Fellowes. I'll be getting on back to my brother's place. I will stay on for several days' visit, though, and, if I can be of any service at any time, you will know where to find me. Mr. Crane, I shall be glad to horn in on your investigation,

too, and trail along whenever you say the word."

"You may easily have mistaken the bark of a thirty-two for that of a thirty-eight, especially since, as you say, the acoustics of the hall confused you at the moment, Mr. Fraser." The detective's tone was pleasantly ingratiating now, but his eyes were steady and rather hard. "However, if a totally untrained ear could distinguish between two distinct, but almost simultaneous, shots, surely you would have been able to do so; that is, provided there had been two shots instead of one. It is a mere supposition as yet, of course."

Ralph Fraser paused in the doorway. "I've been proved wrong once in this case, and I ought to have horse sense enough not to venture a further opinion," he remarked. "However, I'd be willing to wager my bottom dollar that only one shot was fired last night."

When he had taken his departure the coroner and the detective eyed each other in silence. When they heard the gate latch the former asked: "Were you serious about that, Crane, or was it a bluff? Have you actually witnesses who are prepared to swear that two shots were fired?"

"Not actually." Crane smiled. "However, our friend Fraser evidently had some good reason of his own for believing, or at least suspecting, that

the weapon used was not this one." As he spoke he took from his pocket the pistol which had felled Lindsay. "This is, as you see, a thirty-two, a single shot has been fired from it, and you know where it was found. Of course, doctor, if your autopsy has shown that the shot which killed Doyle was fired straight in front of him and on a level with his breast——"

Doctor Fellowes shook his head. "I will be frank with you, Crane. That was my first opinion, based on a hasty examination of the body at the club, but I'll have to modify it in part now. The bullet took a downward course and must have been discharged from several feet, at least, above Doyle's head; how far would depend naturally upon the distance of the assassin from his victim."

"Yes, if Doyle were standing upright, but what if he had been squatting upon bent knees, the upper part of his body still erect, in order the better to see in at the window?" asked Crane.

"In that case any one within the hall of Doyle's own height might have fired point-blank at him—any one, of course, within straight range," the doctor conceded.

Crane began pacing the floor reflectively. All at once he paused on the threshold and faced the other. "Doctor, do you realize that a straight

range may not mean the rear of the hall, alone? Have you noticed the width of that window before which Doyle was stationed? I didn't arrive in time to see the position of his body, but, from what testimony I have been able to gather, it was lying in a crumpled heap under the lantern."

Doctor Fellowes nodded gravely. "That was how I found it when I got there, and Mr. Estridge assured me that its position had not been disturbed in any way. But it has been my experience that, during the excitement following the discovery of such a crime, the body is frequently moved, if only in the effort to learn whether life is extinct or not."

"But, even if it had not been disturbed, the position in which you yourself saw it would not prove that Doyle had been directly in the center of the window space, would it?" asked the detective. "Might he not have been peering in at the extreme right or left of the casing?"

The coroner started. "Why, certainly! And in that case——"

"In that case he would have been within range of almost a complete semicircle of the rotunda—a semicircle which would have reached from the conservatory entrance, where young Landon stood alone, around to the door of the smaller supper

room, where Ogden Bowles had halted, also alone. It would take in all those who stood in the radius between."

"But this pistol!" The coroner picked it up from the table as he spoke. "Doesn't all the circumstantial evidence point to the fact that the fatal shot was fired from it, and that it was flung out of that window at the end of the upper hall, immediately afterward?"

"Yes, but it doesn't necessarily prove that the murderer was hiding up on the second floor," Crane objected. "He might easily, in that minute of stunned sensibility on the part of the people, which followed the sound of the shot, have either slipped past Mrs. Carter and up and down the stairs in time to join the general hue and cry, or he might have dashed down the hall leading to the rear and so up the back staircase. As I understand it, in the confusion that followed the discovery of the crime, it was quite ten or fifteen minutes before any one thought of counting heads. We know at the agency why Doyle was sent down here, of course, and that knowledge will enable us to eliminate a lot of people from suspicion."

"The loss or theft of Mrs. de Forest's necklace," said the coroner.

"'Loss?'" repeated the other.

"Yes. The sheriff has taken charge of it, you know, and an examination shows that the clasp was defective; it might have slipped from the old lady's neck at any time after she put it on in her own home until she missed it at the Harvest Dance and reported the matter to the house committee, a period of several hours." Doctor Fellowes paused and then went on: "Whoever picked it up has been evidently waiting for a large reward to be offered, or he was afraid to dispose of it, not understanding why a public announcement of the loss was not made."

"Loss or deliberately planned theft, wherever that necklace has been hidden during the past month, it was placed in the dragon lantern last night and for a particular reason." The detective made an impatient gesture. "That's beside the point. We're investigating the murder of Jim Doyle, and I can't help feeling that there is something which has been overlooked, some trifling clew that would give us the key to the whole affair."

"This pistol——" began the coroner.

"Splendid bit of circumstantial evidence, but, unless it has been seen in some one's possession lately, it would take a month to trace it back from the manufacturer to the original purchaser and so on down the line. It is not a new model and

hasn't a single mark of identification beyond the usual number, maker's name, and the year in which it was patented. No, doctor, I think I shall try a new trail even if I have to blaze it." Crane picked up his hat. "I'd like a little more intimate knowledge of the people up at the country club than Doyle's reports gave us. Most of the members are your patients, aren't they?"

"The majority of those who make Broadlawns an all-year home," Doctor Fellowes responded. "Their places are all in the neighborhood. The Sowerby place is the nearest; it is that big stone house with turrets, the one we passed just over the hill. On the top of the next hill Mrs. de Forest's old Colonial house stands, and the others of that set are clustered down in the valley. Mrs. Carter's little cottage is sandwiched in between two old farms, within a mile of the club. I have got to call on a patient of mine off Eastville way, but I'll be glad to run you first anywhere you say."

"No, thanks. I think I will stroll around the town a little and get a line on the country club crowd from the local angle. I'll be at the club later if you want to consult me."

Yet, when Crane had seen the doctor's little car disappear down the village street, he turned his

steps rapidly back in the other direction—to the turreted stone house over the hill. He noted the wheel tracks of many vehicles on the driveway as he approached and was not surprised when, in response to his ring at the entrance door, a harassed butler informed him that Mr. Sowerby was not at home and Mrs. Sowerby had absolutely nothing to say for publication.

"I do not represent the press," the detective retorted. "Kindly tell Mrs. Sowerby that Mr. Crane——"

He got no farther. The mention of his name wrought a miraculous change in the servant's manner. "Come right in, sir. Mr. Sowerby has gone up to the country club, but I've had instructions that Mrs. Sowerby would be at home to you, of course, if you should call." The man spoke in a nervous undertone. "This way, sir."

He led the detective into a small drawing-room. A tiny wood fire crackled on the hearth, and the heavy scent of fresh violets in low bowls vied with the cloying, sensuous odor of incense from a bronze brazier. The daylight had been all but excluded by thick curtains which shrouded the windows, and a low wing chair had been drawn up suggestively near a tall, cathedral-backed one.

As Crane seated himself in the latter he smiled

inwardly. The stage had evidently been set for a carefully rehearsed scene, but why so much effort to make an impression upon him? He had learned that Mrs. Sowerby went into a fit of hysterics at the time of the shooting and was one of the first to leave the club, escorted by the Dorrances, before his arrival. Was she merely another of the neurasthenics with whom he had more than once come into contact, or had she some deeper reason for this reception?

She had evidently hoped for his coming, planned for it, and it could not have been difficult to get her self-important husband back to the scene of the previous night's tragedy. Crane thought of the irascible, rheumatic Rutherford Sowerby in this dim, scented, boudoirlike apartment and chuckled to himself. A faint, silken rustle came to his ears, and he turned to greet the small figure in trailing, violet draperies which appeared in the doorway.

"You're the wonderful Mr. Crane, aren't you?" she asked. "I felt so relieved directly I heard you had arrived. I knew you would clear up this dreadful mystery for us! Please sit down and tell me if you have discovered who did that—that fearful thing last night."

She motioned toward the chair, and, as he re-

seated himself, the detective made several quick mental notes. There was a certain native shrewish quality back of the lady's childlike tones, a hardness underlying her delicate features, and the finger tips of the hand she had extended to him were stubby and hard. This youthful wife of an elderly millionaire was not an aristocratic sensation-seeker, after all; for some purpose of her own she was prepared to use him if she could, and he had to admit to himself that her work, although crude, was consistent with her type.

"You flatter me, my dear Mrs. Sowerby!" he replied with exaggerated deference. "I have had very little time, you know, and, with so many people at the club to interview, it is a lengthy business. But I understand that you were ill. I will make my call as brief as possible. If you will just answer a question or two, I won't detain you long."

"I? But what could I possibly tell you?" A sharper note, quickly suppressed, edged the childish voice. "Of course I have been frightfully ill all night, as my husband can tell you, from the sheer horror of the thing, but poor Mr. Grant was, as far as we knew, just a—a sort of an inferior, an employee of the club like Murdock. How could we possibly imagine that he was a detective?

Why has he been there all this past month, disguised and watching us all, and the mystery of it makes the whole affair seem like a perfect nightmare!"

Could that be mere avid curiosity in her tone, or something bordering on anxiety? Crane paused before he responded: "I am sorry, Mrs. Sowerby, but I am afraid I cannot tell you that just now. You were present when the shot was fired?"

She shuddered and shrank back within the screening wings of her chair.

"Yes—no! I—I was in the conservatory—alone. I had gone there to get away from the dancing and noise, for I had a slight headache and didn't want any supper. Then I heard the crash of the shot in the midst of the singing, and some one told me what had happened, and I went into hysterics. I don't see how a highly strung, sensitive woman could have helped it!"

"A Mr. and Mrs. Dorrance brought you home, I believe. Are they intimate friends of yours, Mrs. Sowerby?" Crane asked.

She gave a nervous little laugh, and the fingers, which had been tapping the arms of her chair suddenly clutched them. A full minute passed before she replied in a voice of studied naïveté: "What a funny question, Mr. Crane! The Dor-

rances happened to be the first to leave, and my husband or somebody asked them to take me home, as I was quite beside myself! We are all intimate out here in a way, but they are no closer associates of ours than any other members of our set at the club. Mr. Dorrance is an amusing sort of boy, but his wife, being so much older, doesn't go in for many things except bridge, and, as I have always been far too stupid to learn that, I really know her merely as an acquaintance. Have you interviewed them?"

"Not yet." He rose. "I am sorry you cannot tell me anything more definite about last night's affair, but I won't detain you any longer, Mrs. Sowerby. By the way—from where you were seated in the conservatory could you see the main staircase? Another lady member of your club, a Mrs. Carter, was standing just at its foot, and, although the murder did not shock her into hysteria, it stunned her so that I have been able to gain no valuable impressions from her, either."

"I couldn't imagine Mrs. Carter in hysterics under any circumstances!" Mrs. Sowerby exclaimed with a hard little laugh. "She would pose if the heavens fell!"

"Who is she?" Crane asked with seeming indifference.

"Nobody knows. She appeared here alone about two years ago and got into the club, somehow, but none of the women have taken her up beyond being civil to her. I don't think she minds, though, with all the men yapping at her heels as they do. She made a perfect fool of Phil—Mrs. Dorrance's husband—a season or two ago, but now it is a bachelor for a change—that broker who runs out from town to play golf." Mrs. Sowerby caught herself up hastily and added with a belated return to her childlike manner: "Please don't think I am catty, Mr. Crane, I'm not really, but you quite see what I mean, don't you? I couldn't help showing my feelings by becoming hysterical last night! No woman with any heart could have!"

"I quite understand." The detective spoke with bland sympathy. "You were alone in the conservatory when the crime took place, I think you said, Mrs. Sowerby?"

"Yes. There may have been other people there, of course, but I had hidden myself away in a corner behind some palms and didn't see nor hear any one."

"When the sound of the shot came did you leave the conservatory, or did some one come there to tell you what had happened? Who told you?"

"I don't know! I cannot remember!" she replied. "Of course I must have gotten out into the foyer somehow, but everything was so confused and horrible! I caught a glimpse through the window of—of that poor thing lying out there on the veranda, and the next thing I can recall is of having given way completely, and Mrs. Fraser and some other ladies were attending me. Oh, I shall never forget the sight of that poor man! Why was he sent here to spy upon us? Dear Mr. Crane, surely you can tell just little me! I don't carry tales, really, truly!"

Her hand was on his arm, her coaxing face upturned very close, and the blue eyes were gazing straight into his. For a moment Crane deliberately dropped his mask of elaborate deference.

"Why are you so anxious to know, Mrs. Sowerby?" he demanded bluntly. "Surely you have nothing to fear from the presence of a detective?"

With a shrug she stepped back and again that hard little laugh rose to her lips.

"Scarcely!" The shrill, shrewish note was dominant now in her tones. "One doesn't like

to think, however, that, among one's associates, there may be a person guilty of anything which would bring them under surveillance. Good morning, Mr. Crane!''

Once more out in the bright sunlight and striding down the drive, Crane added a significant note or two to his mental data. Mrs. Sowerby was or had been infatuated with the man named Dorrance, and she was jealous of Mrs. Carter; she had told two slightly conflicting stories of her own actions at the moment of the shooting, and, in spite of her denials, she was deeply and personally concerned in learning the motive for Doyle's presence at the club, although in ignorance of the loss of the necklace which had occasioned it.

Why was she so concerned? Could there be wheels within wheels in this quiet, conservative community? Could there, after all, have been some other possible motive than the theft of the necklace for the murder of Jim Doyle?

CHAPTER X

THE WOMAN UPSTAIRS

RETURNING to the village, Crane possessed himself of a small car at a renting garage. After consulting a road map he started by a wide detour toward the club. The machine he had hired was of an antiquated model and slow and halting in its gait, but it had the double advantage of a dull, neutral-gray color and a silent motor.

The road he had chosen led away from the estates of the country club colony, through a region of small farms, out upon a pleasant highway, bordered on the right by rolling fields and on the left by a deep glen. Through the dense, but almost leafless, trees there came the trickle of a waterfall.

Crane had passed no vehicles upon the way except an occasional farm wagon, but, as he reached the glen, an approaching rumble and roar came to his ears, and he drew up at the extreme right of the road just as another car thundered

past, rocking from side to side, despite its weight, by the speed at which it was driven. The face of the man bent over the wheel was like a demon.

It was distorted with a very frenzy of fury, but, although the man went by in a swift blur, the detective recognized him. The man was the suave broker of the previous night's interview, Ogden Bowles.

Crane shut off his engine and sat back under the hoodlike top for a moment's reflection on the incident. Bowles was the acknowledged suitor of the red-haired Mrs. Carter, yet he was obviously not going to or returning from her little cottage, for it lay several miles in another direction. Where had he been, and what could have put him in such a rage? He had practically asserted the evening before that his only interest out of town was in the country club and his associates there. He, too, had been present when that shot was fired, standing at the extreme left of that semicircle, within pistol range of the window with the dragon lantern.

Crane shrugged and started to alight in order to crank his ancient little car. The faint sound of voices down in the glen at the left reached him, and he paused, then crossed the road quickly and, ducking between the railings of the fence, he

began to make his way cautiously down the steep declivity through the crackling underbrush.

The sound of the voices came nearer, and, as Crane reached a sort of path which wound along the bank of a narrow stream, he saw a man and a woman approaching. The man was young and dapper, with a small, blond mustache, and he was evidently under stress of some violent emotion, for he gesticulated jerkily as he trotted along beside his taller companion, who walked steadily with a free, swinging stride. She wore a clinging sweater, and the sunlight, striking down through the naked branches of the trees, glowed on her bare head and turned it to molten copper.

Crane did not know the man, but he had little difficulty in recognizing Mrs. Carter, and he slipped hastily behind a clump of low-growing evergreens, as the couple approached.

"I tell you it's life or death!" The man's voice fairly broke in his excitement. "Don't you suppose I realize my position as it is? No mercy would be shown——"

"You speak of mercy?" They were abreast of the detective now, and the contempt in the woman's rich, calm tones was as keen as a knife blade. "Women have shown me scant mercy in

my life; why should I ruin myself now in order to help you to see that another doesn't suffer?"

"Then I'll tell!" The man's voice rose in a cry of rage. "I swear to Heaven I'll tell!"

"Very well, you cur!" Mrs. Carter's tones had not risen, and, as the couple rapidly receded down the path, the detective could barely distinguish her words. "The world is wide, and Broadlawns is only a tiny corner of it."

The man began to plead in an indistinguishable, vehement murmur, and Crane scrambled back to the road and hurriedly cranked up his car. He drove back the way he had come until he reached a crossroad. A glance at the map showed him it must be a short cut to the club. The reason was apparent now for Bowles' jealous rage. But what was the secret which the inscrutable Mrs. Carter had defied her companion to disclose, and who was the other woman he was trying to induce her to save from suffering?

His reflections were interrupted by a deep-toned, resonant hail, and, looking up sharply, he beheld the head and shoulders of Samuel Estridge rising from behind a trim hedge of privet.

"Just the man I want to see!" the attorney exclaimed. "Come in and have lunch with me,

Crane. I've been puttering around the club all the morning waiting for you to turn up, but they told me you had gone off with the coroner."

The detective was only too glad to accept, not only because of this signal honor paid to him by one of the most eminent members of the bar and the opportunity to study him at close range, but because he felt that no one else in the colony could give him more information of the sort he required.

He drove in between pillars of the privet, turned his machine over to the chauffeur, and followed his host into the ivy-covered brick cottage.

"I hired that old bus there in the village. After the autopsy I left Doctor Fellowes and called on Mr. Sowerby, but I learned that he, too, had gone up to the club," Crane explained.

Samuel Estridge's eyes twinkled. "I fancy your time wasn't wasted, however, if you were looking for any gossip of the colony," he observed dryly. "Did the autopsy disclose what we expected?"

Crane nodded. "I don't think I am violating any professional confidence of the coroner's in saying that the weapon which knocked out your man Lindsay was unquestionably, as far as the

present circumstantial evidence goes, the same that was used to kill Doyle. How is Lindsay? I forgot to ask the doctor."

"Conscious and coming around all right, but the only thing he can remember, just before something hit him, was a sort of scraping noise; might have been the raising of that upper hall window, eh?"

"Yes—Mr. Estridge, I'm not going to accept your hospitality and abuse it, nor am I stupid enough to think that I could attempt to pump the cleverest cross-examiner in the courts to-day and get away with it!" Crane laughed with boyish frankness. "However, I do want some dope on the crowd out here that only you can give me, if you will."

"Gladly! Come along into the dining room, our chops are getting cold." The attorney laughed also and led his guest into the austere Jacobean room. He waited until his man had served them and withdrawn before he added: "I'm afraid, Crane, that I'm reaching the age when a man loves to gossip. What can I tell you?"

"First of all I must confess that I did get a bit of illuminating gossip to-day, but not in the way that you imagine, sir," Crane responded candidly. "In an investigation of this sort, where I am fol-

lowing a blind trail, the little, insignificant details about the lives of the people who were present when the crime was committed, sometimes provide unexpectedly valuable clews, even though they themselves are unquestionably innocent. For instance, can you tell me anything more about Mr. Fraser's brother than that he comes from Texas and has done some banking business with Mr. Sowerby's institution? I met him again this morning, and he seems to be a bug on weapons, especially firearms."

"So Jack told me, but I never met Ralph Fraser until yesterday afternoon," Estridge remarked. "He goes in more for collecting freak man-killing inventions, I believe, than the sort which usually come under your professional notice or mine. I don't mean bombs, but pistols and daggers, disguised more or less innocently, after the manner of the old sword canes. He seems to be rather an ingenuous sort of fellow for such a bloodthirsty hobby, and, since you have already got the weapon with which, in all human probability, the murder was committed last night, I don't believe he will be of much use to you."

"I merely used him as an illustration," Crane averred. "Then there is the broker, Mr. Bowles;

what is his particular hobby, other than golf and defying speed laws?"

"I don't believe I know," replied the attorney thoughtfully. "He hasn't been a member long, but he was proposed and seconded by two members of the house committee, one of whom is ill, and the other away just now. I never realized it until you spoke, but I do not believe that any of the rest of us know much about him or his personal proclivities."

"I gather that he was rather more of a ladies' man," Crane observed slyly. "By the way, Mr. Estridge, I don't mean to be indiscreet, but I have heard that there is a woman member of your club about whom no one seems to know very much, either, although that is the worst that any one appears able to say against her. Can you tell me where she came from and who were her social sponsors? I work mostly by a process of elimination, you know, and I like to have all the irrelevant factors tabulated and out of my way."

The attorney hesitated for a moment frowningly, and then his brow cleared. "I can see no harm in giving you the information which, with a little more time and trouble, you might easily obtain elsewhere. The lady to whom you refer

came from Raleigh, North Carolina, about three years ago, deposited negotiable stocks and bonds for a substantial amount in one of the local banks, and purchased the cottage which she now occupies. Of course being a stranger here and alone I will admit that she was looked at rather askance by the other matrons of the colony, but she made no attempt to force herself upon the society of any one and lived for several months in the strictest seclusion. Then gradually people began taking her up, and at length somebody proposed her at the club. I have been given to understand that she has a substantial income from her late husband's estate."

"Does any one know what her late husband's business was, or his first name?" asked the detective.

Again the attorney hesitated before he replied: "His name was Amsa, or Abner, or some such old-fashioned name. I have heard that he was elderly and retired when she married him, and she was a mere girl. If I were a married man myself, Mr. Crane, I might be able to give you more intimate details, but, being just a bachelor, the ladies do not confide in me. However, it has been hinted that her life wasn't particularly happy—the old story of May and December, I suppose—and his

death was more of a relief than a sorrow. At least that is the reason which is given for her distaste to discuss the past. There, you see, Crane, I told you I feared I had reached the age when a man loves to gossip!"

Accepting the final remark as a hint the detective turned the conversation away from personalities, and it was not until just as he was taking leave of his host that he asked, as though in an afterthought: "Know any blond young man around here who wears a little mustache and dresses like a fashion plate, only a little more so, Mr. Estridge? He has rather a high voice, and I imagine he thinks pretty well of himself."

The attorney laughed carelessly. "Oh, you mean young Phil Dorrance! No one takes him very seriously, I am afraid. He and his wife are in the crowd up at the country club, but you didn't meet him because they went home early and escorted Mrs. Sowerby, whose nerves had gone to pieces. He is a harmless sort, too, and we've all known him for years."

Crane laughed in return. "I didn't suspect him, sir, of carrying the popgun! Thanks so much for your good hospitality and your good counsel; I am sure I shall profit by both."

Chugging off down the road, the detective

turned a curve in leisurely fashion and then, secure from observation, he studied his map again.

The way to the country club he had already ascertained, but, after a prolonged scrutiny, he selected a veritable network of byways, which finally brought him to the gate of a modest little villa modeled after the Elizabethan style. Here he left his car in the roadway and, proceeding up the path, was on the point of ringing the bell when a woman's voice called from the garden: "You are Mr. Crane, aren't you? If you want to talk to me, wouldn't you rather sit out here? It is not really cold yet, you know."

Turning he beheld the woman of the sweater whom he had seen that morning on the glen road. Her coppery hair glowed in the sunlight. She beckoned invitingly to a garden seat, and nothing loath the detective complied, involuntarily comparing this reception with that of the morning from another hostess. Whatever Mrs. Carter's secret might be, she was evidently unafraid or unashamed of its possible consequences. Glancing into her clear eyes Crane felt a shade of compunction.

"I am very sorry to intrude upon you, Mrs. Carter." Genuine sincerity rang in his tones.

"I have just been lunching with Mr. Estridge, and, of course, our conversation hinged upon last night's tragedy at the country club."

"Naturally, Mr. Crane, since you have come out here to investigate it." Her steady eyes regarded him unblinkingly. "Is there any way in which I may assist you?"

"It is barely possible, Mrs. Carter. You will forgive me for recalling to you the moment which so unnerved you last evening, the moment in which the shot was fired which killed my colleague." He watched her face narrowly as he spoke, and it did not blanch nor weaken as Mrs. Sowerby's had done.

"Perfectly, Mr. Crane. Do you think that I or any one else present could forget it? That poor young man!" The lines of settled sorrow had deepened around her mobile lips.

"You had been up in the ladies' dressing room, resting, I think," Crane went on. "Was there no maid assigned there?"

"Oh, yes, but I fancy she had gone down to the kitchen or pantry. There was no one there when the singing started, except, of course, Mrs. Sowerby. I left her and then came downstairs."

"What!" The exclamation arose unbidden to

the detective's lips, and instinctively he amended it. "Only Mrs. Sowerby!"

"Yes, Mr. Crane. When I descended the stairs Mrs. Sowerby was resting on a couch in one of the dressing rooms. There could have been no one else on that upper floor."

CHAPTER XI

THE SHOT FROM THE AIR

IT seemed to Crane, despite his long years of training in self-control, that his face must have betrayed his surprise at Mrs. Carter's astonishing revelation, but he did not permit his glance to waver, and his voice was as steady as her own calm one. "You did not hold any conversation with Mrs. Sowerby when you came upon her in the dressing room?"

"No. There are two rest rooms, you know, and I had been reclining in the other one; I merely glanced in her room as I passed. I do not know when she went downstairs. As I told you, the sound of the shot, just as I reached the bottom, stunned me so that I was practically oblivious to everything about me for some little time. But in what way can I help you, Mr. Crane?" She hesitated and then added: "I trust the matter will be cleared up soon and the murderer discov-

ered, not only in the interests of justice, but because I am thinking of going away."

She glanced off as she spoke toward the little cottage, half hidden among the bare trees, and there was an unmistakable note of wistfulness in her tones. The controversy, which he had overheard in part in the glen that morning, returned to the detective's mind, and her final words rang again in his ears: "The world is wide and Broadlawns is only a tiny corner of it." Had she defied Dorrance to the end, and would what he meant to tell ruin her and drive her forth from her quiet home?

"Isn't your decision rather a hasty one, Mrs. Carter?" His tone was that of studied indifference, but the one in which she replied was slightly shaken.

"No. I have not discussed it, but for some time I have considered returning to my old home. As soon as I can arrange my affairs and dispose of my little place here I am going back."

"To Raleigh?"

"Who told you I came from there?" Her voice had steadied once more, but each word came slowly as though carefully chosen. "As a matter of fact we lived quite a little way out in the country, several miles from any one, except negroes and

what are known down there as 'poor whites.' However, after my husband's death, I transacted my financial affairs with bankers in Raleigh and naturally gave them as my business reference on coming here."

"You had friends here, Mrs. Carter? Why did you select Broadlawns as your home?"

"A mere whim." A little twisted smile came to her lips. "I wanted to get away from the South and everything that would remind me of it. I had seen pictures of the Broadlawns Country Club at the time of a golf tournament, several years ago, and, when I came to New York, an agent for suburban real estate whom I consulted had this cottage on his list. I came out to see it and was charmed by the whole atmosphere of the place, but of late I find that I have been growing homesick, and the climate does not agree with me. As soon as I am no longer needed as a witness for that tragic affair at the club I want to return to North Carolina."

"Yet if you were so anxious to get away from everything that reminded you of the South, you could not have been very happy there," Crane remarked. "You must forgive these personal questions, Mrs. Carter, but I shall have to make out the fullest possible report for my chief con-

cerning every one who was on the scene of the crime."

"I quite understand," she replied. "My married life was not altogether happy, chiefly because of the loneliness and isolation in which my husband lived. He was elderly and had many eccentricities, but, after his death, I found pleasant friends in Raleigh during the short period of my stay there, and those I have made here are less congenial."

"What was your husband's full name, Mrs. Carter, and when did he die?"

"Asa Carter; his death took place about three and a half years ago. My maiden name was Nina Shirley, and I came from Charlotte. I was an orphan when I married Mr. Carter, eleven years ago. Doubtless some of my former school friends in Charlotte would remember me, but I have seen none of them since my marriage. My husband would tolerate no visitors, and my desultory correspondence soon languished. Our nearest post-office address, by the way, was a tiny hamlet called Mosely. I think, Mr. Crane, that that is all the information I can give you."

Her air of finality was pointed, but the detective made no move to depart. Instead he asked: "Do you know of any enmity which you may have

incurred, Mrs. Carter, either here, or elsewhere? Is there any one, man or woman, to whom you may, however unconsciously, have given cause to harm you?"

"What a strange question!" She spoke in a low voice scarcely above a whisper. "Why should any one wish to harm me, Mr. Crane? I came here a stranger, desiring only peace and seclusion, and I sought no society, the people hereabout sought me. It was only after repeated urging that I consented to become a member of the country club, but I have participated very little in the social life there and have made no really close friendships. To my knowledge I have not an enemy in the world."

"You say that you have made no close friendships, yet, among all the people here, with whom have you most frequently been associated?"

For a moment her smooth brow wrinkled as though in thought, and then she replied hesitatingly: "There is always rumor and gossip about a woman alone, especially in a small, circumscribed country-club community. I have avoided any but the most formal associations with the members, although Mrs. Fraser has been very cordial, and I have found little Miss Dare most unaffected and charming." She paused. "I

have occasionally consulted Mr. Estridge or Mr. Sowerby about investments, and, when I first joined the club, Mr. Dorrance offered to teach me to play golf, but I did not care for it and proved a poor pupil. After several seasons I found myself barely acquainted with the others, with the exception of Mr. Bowles. He has been assiduous in his attempts to relieve my loneliness. If any gossip has reached your ears it must be in connection with his attentions to me, but they are merely those of a friend; I have no intention of ever marrying again. Really, Mr. Crane, I cannot understand what these questions may mean! Has any one been making any absurd accusations against me?"

Resentment struggled with a sort of resigned tolerance in her tone, and, with the insufficient data at his command, the detective dared not betray the knowledge gained by overhearing that conversation in the glen. But another phrase, which had been used by the woman before him, returned to his mind: "Women have shown me scant mercy in my life." He decided to make one last effort.

"No one has been making any direct accusations, Mrs. Carter, but, as you say, there are always rumors and petty gossip in a place like this, not only about you, but about all other young and

attractive women, and they are most cruel to their own sex. These are merely routine questions, for you, in common with the others who were present at the moment of the murder last night, have established your position. But can't you tell me if there is any woman who has been unkind to you and whom you have in your power to aid or injure if you would?"

Mrs. Carter rose, and the setting sun glinted on her copper-red hair as it had done that morning, her voice, too, holding the same note of controlled contempt. "I realize now that you have already been listening to what you call petty gossip about me, Mr. Crane, but I do not know to what you allude. None of it has reached my ears. However, as I have already stated, I have not an enemy in the world, nor is there any one, man or woman, whom I could injure if I would."

Crane rose also, and his frank, boyish, ingratiating laugh broke the tension in the air. "Mrs. Carter, I may tell you in confidence that, in my preliminary interviews with the different ladies of the country-club colony, each one has seemed to consider the others their potential enemies. I will not trouble you further now, and I will not intrude upon you again until the inquest, unless it is absolutely necessary."

His hostess' manner softened to graciousness as she accompanied him to the gate. "I wish it were within my power, Mr. Crane, to aid you in your inquiry, but the horrible affair of last night is as much of a mystery to me as it must have been to all those present, except the murderer himself; more, in fact, since some of the house committee, at least, must have known why poor Mr. Grant—or Doyle—was installed in the club in the first place, whereas the majority of us were, and still are, ignorant of the motive for his presence there."

Taking leave of her, the detective cranked up his little car and descended into the valley. Here the homes of the country-club colony clustered about the Colonial mansion of Mrs. de Forest. It was not to that august matron, however, that he paid his next visit, but, aided by the directions of a small boy whom he met by the roadside, he pulled up before a modern bungalow, its grounds still ablaze with late autumn flowers, and, alighting, asked for Mrs. Fraser.

She appeared almost upon the heels of her trim little maid, and her firm handclasp held no hint of other than the sentiments which she expressed in her greeting. "Can I help you in any way, Mr. Crane? My brother-in-law said that he met you at the coroner's this morning, but, unfortu-

nately, both he and my husband have gone over to the club. However, if I may be of any assistance, I shall be only too glad to answer any questions to the best of my knowledge."

"Thank you." He accepted the seat to which she motioned him in the spacious, chintz-hung drawing-room and regarded her appreciatively across the little tea table, at which she proceeded to busy herself. Her mouth was sensitive, but humorous, her eyes candid and clear with the atmosphere of the clean out-doors which had tanned her skin an honest brown and tinted her chestnut hair with a faded gold. "I asked for you, Mrs. Fraser, but it was really Mr. Ralph Fraser I wanted to consult once more, for I understand that he is quite an authority on firearms."

"That sort of thing is a hobby with Ralph, but I know very little about it; I have a horror of killing things." She gave a little shiver. "Whenever Ralph comes to see us he brings some new freak pistol or deadly trick knife. He goes to all kinds of trouble to find these things, but it is merely the enthusiasm of the collector."

"And your husband does not share it any more than you?"

She laughed. "Oh, Jack goes duck shooting every year, but, aside from that, I believe his only

passion, beside business, is golf; he is as crazy about it as I am, and, if this dreadful thing had not happened at the club last night, we were going to teach Ralph to play during this visit. He brought down an outfit of everything suggested to him in a sporting-goods shop."

"Did he bring anything else, Mrs. Fraser? Any new freak weapon which he may have added to his collection? I should like to see it if he did. I am interested in such things myself," the detective remarked casually.

"I don't know." She handed him a cup of tea across the little table. "Ralph only arrived on the final train before the dance last evening, and I was so busy dressing and seeing that he was served with a belated dinner that I really did not pay much attention to him beyond a hurried greeting. I believe I did overhear him tell Jack that he had some rather remarkable curiosity to show him later. If it is in the line of his hobby I am sure that he will be only too delighted to exhibit it to you, too."

Crane stirred his tea reflectively for a moment and then observed: "Of course I am trying to interview every one who was present when my colleague was killed last night, but it is rather a large order, in so short a time, before the inquest.

Can you help me by telling me something about the rest of the people who were there?''

Mrs. Fraser raised protesting hands.

''Don't ask me for current gossip, please! I never listen to any; perhaps that is why I am on cordial speaking terms with every one. They have all been here longer than we, with the exception of Mr. Bowles, who only became a member this season, and Mrs. Carter, who settled here two or three years ago.''

''Mrs. Carter is one of your best friends, is she not, Mrs. Fraser?'' Crane put the question in an idly inconsequential tone, but his hostess' surprise at its tenor made her reply with naïve haste: ''Why, no. I was among the first to call upon her, and I found her very interesting. You see, we all know each other's every mood so well out here that, at times, we bore each other to tears, and a new personality is welcome. I tried to draw Mrs. Carter out and make a real friend of her, but there is something baffling about her. This something, while it does not actually repel one, seems to hold one at arm's length. She has always been very pleasant, but I do not feel that I know her any better than on the day of my first call.'' Mrs. Fraser paused and drew a deep breath. ''But all this is dangerously close to

gossip, isn't it? Mrs. Carter is reserved, but really very charming."

Crane placed his teacup upon the table. "Miss Dare is also a newcomer, is she not? And Mr. Landon, too?"

"Oh, Alice Dare is sponsored by her aunt, Mrs. de Forest, who is quite the leader of everything out here, and Gerald Landon is our own house guest and a dear boy. Jack put him up at the club for the season, and he plays splendid golf!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "I think you know that he has a position in the bank of which Mr. Sowerby is president, and he and Alice—but there—I am gossiping again!"

Crane smiled. "I have already heard rumors of an engagement between them, Mrs. Fraser, so you are not telling tales out of school."

Her face sobered. "That rumor is a little premature, I am afraid, for they are both mere children without a penny between them, and Mrs. de Forest has more ambitious plans for her niece."

"Mrs. de Forest is very wealthy herself, is she not?" the detective asked. "I have heard of some famous diamonds of hers, and her estate on the hill seems to be the most pretentious on the countryside."

"Oh, yes, she has a great deal of money, I be-

lieve, but Alice is an orphan and wholly dependent upon her," Mrs. Fraser responded, adding, with a little laugh, "I suppose the whole neighborhood has heard about the famous de Forest necklace, but she hasn't worn it lately. I fancy it is too gorgeous for our modest set out here. You are not going, Mr. Crane? My husband and his brother ought to be back from the club very shortly, and they may be able to give you information of more value than I have been able to do, especially as Jack——"

She caught herself up suddenly, biting her lips, and Crane was quick to follow up her slip. "What, Mrs. Fraser? Why do you think that your husband would be especially able to give me information of value?"

She flushed beneath the clear tan of her cheeks and, after hesitating, drew a deep breath. "I am afraid that I have gone too far, now, not to explain, but I hope you will believe me. My husband has never betrayed the confidence of any one else to me, but wives have a sort of way of divining things, you know, and Jack is a member of the house committee of the club. I do not know why that poor detective, who was shot last night, was ever engaged to come out here, but I believe Jack does know, just as you must. That is why I

thought that he would be better informed of the situation and able to help you."

"You have not asked him, Mrs. Fraser?" Crane smiled as he held out his hand, and she smiled, too, as she placed hers within it.

"No, Mr. Crane. I knew that he would have told me if he could, but I observed last night, in the excitement following the shooting, that he did not seem as surprised as the rest at the penetration of your associate's disguise, nor even at the fact of the murder itself, and he was anxious only to discover the author of it. Of course he could not have anticipated the crime, but that he was not astounded when it did take place shows that there must have been a very serious reason for the employment of a private detective at Broadlawns—a reason as serious as life and death itself! I am wondering——"

"Yes?" he asked, as she hesitated once more.

"Why that moment of all others was chosen for the murder, virtually in the presence of a score of people, when the poor fellow might so easily have been done to death at any time during the past month in one of his solitary rambles about the lonelier stretches of the golf course. Could he have been on the point of succeeding, in whatever his quest was, or could some one else among us

have discovered his identity and had another cause to fear the presence of a detective?"

"What made you think of that?" Crane asked quickly.

"I dare not accuse anybody!" She had paled beneath her tan, and her reply came in a low tone, surcharged with emotion. "I have not spoken of this to any one, not even my husband, because I was not sure of myself, sure, I mean that my imagination had not played me false. Yet it has been on my mind ever since, and I do not think that the noise of the shot could have quite robbed me of my senses, although it startled me, of course. Besides, I saw it an instant before the sound came."

"Saw what, Mrs. Fraser?" The detective prompted her eagerly.

"A tiny flash of light like a spark, which winked and went out, just as the roar of the shot reverberated through the wide spaces of the foyer."

"You were standing with Miss Dare, your husband, and your brother-in-law, between the entrance to the conservatory and the door leading to the billiard room, were you not? Do you recall in what direction you yourself were facing?" Crane could scarcely restrain the excitement which he felt from betraying itself in his tones. "Was

it toward the porch and the window where the dragon lantern hung?"

"No," she responded slowly. "I remember distinctly that I was facing straight across the hall, past the foot of the staircase and in the general direction of the steward's desk and the entrances to the dining and smaller supper rooms. I was singing with the rest and had raised my eyes slightly, as most amateurs do when they reach for a higher note than their usual range. That is how I happened to see the tiny flash, I suppose, for it seemed to start quite far above my head, above the heads of any one there, and, in the brief second before it disappeared, I fancied that it moved slightly in a downward course. It was as though the shot were fired from the air."

"You say that you were looking past the foot of the stairs, but, if that moving spark, which you saw, were above the heads of any one standing on the floor of the rotunda, could it not have come from somewhere upon the staircase itself?" asked the detective. "Think carefully, Mrs. Fraser, for it is important."

But Mrs. Fraser shook her head with decision. "No, Mr. Crane. That was the first thought which came to me after the lights were turned on and the body discovered, but the flash was much

farther over toward the center of the hall than where the stairs end."

"Do you recall who was standing on the opposite side of the hall when the lights went up?"

"No!" she replied quickly, too quickly for her assertion to carry conviction. Evidently realizing this she added: "In the general excitement it seemed ages before some one found the switch for the lights, and then everybody was rushing about in the wildest confusion. But, while the people were assembling for the singing and the string orchestra was playing the introduction, I noticed several people on the opposite side of the hall; Mrs. de Forest in her chair, the Dorrances, Mr. Bowles, Murdock behind his desk, and several others moving about between. Really, Mr. Crane, that little flash may have meant nothing."

"Then, if it were not the flash from the revolver shot which killed Doyle—to put into plain words what your suspicions really mean, Mrs. Fraser—why did you say that the motive for his murder might have been other than the errand which brought him here, that some one else among you might have had a different cause to fear the presence of a detective?"

She looked genuinely distressed. "I—I scarcely know!" she said. "Naturally I was curious why

a detective should have been installed in our peaceful little club without the knowledge of the majority of the members in the first place, and, in casting about in my own mind, I could think of only two reasons which might be even remotely possible; theft, or some impending social scandal. None of those on the opposite side of the hall, when the lights were lowered, could have been thought of as guilty of the former, for the steward is the essence of integrity, and the rest were all members like ourselves. As for scandal—sordid enough to reach the divorce courts, I mean—that is equally unthinkable. I had a vague idea, without an iota of knowledge to back it up, that some one might have had a private reason, quite apart from our lives out here, for fearing Doyle's presence. Of course it is the most probable thing, isn't it, that, in the darkness, some stranger stole up from the rear hall beside the staircase——"

It was Crane's turn to shake his head. "And going out into the center of the hall, fired that shot which seemed to come from up in the air? No, Mrs. Fraser, I think we must dismiss that as even a possibility. But, if you know of no scandal and no theft, may I ask why you thought Doyle was sent out here?"

"Well, there have been a series of petty thefts,

I believe, from the men's lockers. Besides, minor complaints have been made about the way the club accounts were kept during the summer. Our real clubhouse secretary left very suddenly and supposedly went West for his health, just before Mr. Doyle appeared among us, you know, and, although I had no more reason to suspect him of dishonesty than my own husband, I cannot think of any other reason for Doyle's having been engaged to come to Broadlawns at all."

"Mrs. Fraser"—Crane paused at the doorway, to which she had accompanied him—"you will learn at the inquest why my colleague was summoned here, and, in the meantime, I want to thank you for being as candid with me as you have. I will promise you to keep your confidence."

"I may have been indiscreet, but I told you only what I thought it was my duty to disclose, even though I may have been mistaken about that little flash of light," she responded. "If it is not necessary I do hope that you will not mention my silly little suspicions to any one."

He promised and took his departure, but, as he turned his flivver into the road that led to the club, the detective realized that his clear-eyed, level-headed hostess had told him as much as she dared of her real suspicions, that she would not

have mentioned them had they been either petty or silly, and that in her he had discovered a possible ally who might prove as valuable as Estridge himself.

He had started out that morning without a possible clew to guide him. Now he was returning to the club with a multiplicity of vague indications which pointed in so many different directions that he scarcely knew which to endeavor to trace first.

Why had Mrs. Sowerby lied and claimed to have been in the conservatory? In reality had she been upstairs at the moment the fatal shot was fired? What was the secret which Dorrance had threatened to divulge concerning Mrs. Carter, and whence had come her sudden decision to leave Broadlawns?

Aside from these questions, however, two others had presented themselves to Crane's mind. These he determined to have settled without loss of time by his operatives. One was borne of a too hasty reply in the coroner's cottage that morning, and this question was unconsciously attested to by a remark of the lady whom he had just left; the second was the result of a ray of sunlight striking through the bare branches of trees.

On his arrival at the club he found a group of men, among them Rutherford Sowerby and the

Fraser brothers, evidently awaiting him on the veranda, but, with a wave of his hand in greeting, he kept on around the drive to the rear. There the ubiquitous Murdock hastened out to him before he had fairly alighted, and he requested that the two men, who had come out with him from the agency, be summoned.

"Walsh," he began without ceremony to the younger of his operatives, "I want you to catch the next train into town—the club bus will take you to the station. I may want my own car here as well as this flivver. Go straight to the old man and tell him I want you to go to Charlotte, North Carolina. Find out all you can about a young girl who lived there eleven years ago, an orphan named Nina Shirley, who married a rich, elderly man named Asa Carter and went to live on an estate near Mosely, a village not far from Raleigh."

Walsh, who had evidently been hearing the gossip of the club servants, smiled knowingly. "I get you, sir," he answered. "Tall, good-looking vamp with red hair pulled down tight over her ears."

"Not red hair—*black!*" Crane interrupted him brusquely. "I don't believe it was red until she came North, Walsh. Find out, if you can, why

she wears it in that fashion; I think there may be a reason with a story behind it."

After he had concluded his instructions and Walsh had departed Crane turned to the other operative. "Jewett, without asking any questions of anybody or making yourself too conspicuous, I want you to nose around the clubhouse and see if you can find in the wall of either the big, round entrance hall or the conservatory the mark of a single bullet hole."

"Yes, Mr. Crane." Jewett spoke as stolidly as though he had been asked to find a package of cigarettes. "About how large caliber a bullet would it be?"

"Unless I am very much mistaken, Jewett, it will be of the smallest caliber known—.22, and you will find the mark of it considerably higher than your head."

CHAPTER XII

"I KILLED HIM"

"WELL, Mr. Crane, have you been making much progress?" Rutherford Sowerby demanded. The detective had joined him and the Fraser brothers on the veranda, a few minutes later.

Crane shook his head noncommittally. "I can't tell just yet, Mr. Sowerby. I stopped at your house this morning, and, although you were not there, Mrs. Sowerby very kindly received me."

"What?" demanded the ungallant husband. "A fat lot of valuable clews she could give you! All the gossip and petty scandal of the neighborhood!"

"It wasn't what Mrs. Sowerby told me, so much as what she did not tell me, which I found of partial interest in regard to the case." Crane smiled and turned to the younger of the Fraser brothers. "Everybody is most hospitable to me out here. I had lunch with Mr. Estridge, and just

now, Mr. Fraser, your wife gave me a very delightful cup of tea." As he spoke, however, the detective looked beyond Jack Fraser to the latter's brother-in-law and observed that Ralph Fraser's face had turned a dull, brick red.

"Did she give you any information of value? By Jove, I wish she or some one could!" Jack Fraser exclaimed. "Aside from all selfish notions about the scandal of the thing and its reactions upon all of us here, more or less, it is the confounded mystery and the cowardly way the poor fellow was done to death that gets me! Of course, except for my brother here——"

"Oh, don't mind me!" Ralph Fraser rejoined. "I'm only an outsider; you three know why he was brought down in the first place and that ought to give you a line on the man who killed him. You can mark my words, though; this inquest of yours out here on Monday won't amount to a hill of beans. I'll watch the papers for the real results when I get back to Texas and Mr. Crane has had a chance to work out the case."

"I hope to work out some minor details, at least, in connection with it before that, Mr. Fraser," Crane remarked.

"Unless my brother is held as a material wit-

ness, which seems a most remote contingency, he has decided to go directly home again." Jack Fraser turned to the bank president as he spoke. "It will disappoint Elsie a lot, for she had looked forward to converting him to golf during this visit. But, after this tragedy, of course, the club will be closed for the autumn and winter, at least."

"Yes," Ralph assented somewhat grimly, "after I let a clerk in a sporting-goods store sell me a mail bag full of dinky little clubs and a couple of boxes of balls!"

"That is one funny thing about it!" Jack laughed. "If you happen to be a novice and you leave it to those chaps they usually load you up with all sorts of useless things, but the one who sold you that outfit of yours, Ralph, must have been caught napping, for he left out one of the most essential, if not the most essential, of the lot! I went through your bag at the house this morning and found that you have no driver!"

"Thought you brought your golf bag with you when you came over to the dance last night, Fraser," Sowerby remarked. "I've got a battered old driver that you can use, if they keep the course open. Don't play any more myself since I broke my ankle in that motor accident, a year ago, though

my wife will persist in calling it gout! However, we're getting away from the main issue. About that shot last night, Mr. Crane——"

But Renwick Crane had slipped away quietly, without a word of excuse or apology, and, sauntering past the conservatory, where Jewett was painstakingly looking for the microscopic bullet hole, he found his way to the locker room at the rear. Its sole occupant was a slim, but athletic-appearing, young man in the late twenties. A healthily tanned, smooth-shaven countenance turned in eager curiosity to the detective. "Hello, Mr. Crane! How are things coming with your investigation? I guess you don't remember me, meeting such a crowd of us here last evening."

"Yes, I do," Crane said. "You are the Frasers' friend, Mr. Landon, aren't you? You stood in the entrance to the conservatory when that shot was fired, I think you told us."

The young man nodded. "Funny thing about that," he remarked. "It must have been my nerves, of course, but I am in pretty fair condition and not usually jumpy. I could not actually have heard that bullet strike Doyle's body, even without the roar of the shot still pounding in my ears, but I could swear that I heard a dull sort of 'ping,' right near me, at the same instant that

the revolver must have been fired. I suppose I was closer to that window, where Doyle was standing, than anybody else, but not close enough to hear the whir of the bullet, let alone the impact when it found its mark. Odd, isn't it?"

"Very!" The detective spoke dryly, but the blood leaped suddenly in his veins. "I have found it to be my experience that imagination plays strange tricks with the most normal of us in moments of tense excitement. The entrance to the conservatory is wide; were you standing nearer the windows, or more toward your right, where the Frasers and Miss Dare were standing?"

Gerald Landon bent once more over the golf bag and the clubs he was examining, but not quickly enough to hide the boyish flush which mounted to his brow. "I was standing toward the left of the conservatory entrance, with my back almost turned to the windows of the rotunda which look out upon the veranda," he replied frankly. "I happened to be looking straight at the group of people you mentioned when the sound of the shot came."

"Then you saw nothing else at that instant? No sudden flash of light across your eyes, for instance?"

"No, Mr. Crane, not until the hubbub arose and

all the lights were turned on full. I can tell you that, in spite of all that I went through overseas, I had a sickish minute when I ran out on the veranda with the others and saw that poor chap lying there! I liked him, and I believe that I got to be more chummy with him than any of the members of the club. I'm only a guest here, and, of course, I had no more suspicion of his real identity than those of the rest of us." Landon glanced up with a whimsical twinkle in his eyes. "Maybe he suspected me, though, of whatever it was he came out here to investigate! I don't think so, for it seems to me that it was I who sought his society, and he was a quiet sort of fellow; never talked much or asked a single question that I can remember. I used to drag him out to play a round of golf with me now and then. Just think of it! He handled this very driver many a time!"

As he spoke the young man held out a golf club, and Crane took it and examined it gravely, mentally noting its weight and shape and general difference from the others in Landon's bag. He handed it back and asked casually: "Haven't seen an odd driver lying about here anywhere, have you?"

"No. I'm just sorting out my own clubs from Jack's, for I've played my last round of the sea-

son. As soon as the inquest is over I shall be off for town."

Crane sauntered leisurely around the room, idly examining such lockers as were open, with the air of an interested visitor, but his keen, darting glance missed nothing. Then, with a nod to Landon, he strolled back into the rotunda once more and to the left of the conservatory entrance.

Jewett, who was still pottering about within, suddenly heard a low, peculiar whistle. He hurried out to find his superior eying, with great absorption, a small spot in the oak paneling of the wall, just above his head.

"That's just a wormhole; I saw it before," Jewett remarked. "There are plenty more of them in the paneling on the other side of the entrance. The steward told me that these panels were very old and were brought from some other building and set in here."

"Wormhole, is it?" retorted Crane. "I've seen antique oak before, but I never saw a wormhole like freshly bored wood, nor one that dropped a grain or two of new sawdust. Look down at your feet."

The operative did so and uttered an exclamation of amazed vexation, as the yellowish specks glinted back at him from the floor which had been

highly waxed for the dance of the previous night.

"That's what comes of taking things for granted. It explains, also, why I am still in the old rut, though years longer with the old man than you, Crane!" he declared. "I did notice that hole up there, but I had examined the others pretty thoroughly first, and I didn't think it would be worth while to probe this one."

His tone was so crestfallen that Crane withheld a rebuke and merely said: "Get a chair with a wooden seat and lend me your penknife; its blade is longer than mine. Look sharp, Jewett, before that group on the veranda are wise to what we are doing. Never mind about excuses now; we all make mistakes."

Jewett obeyed with alacrity, and, mounting the chair, his superior took from him the knife with its keen, narrow blade and began twisting it in the tiny hole which marred the time-mellowed grain of the ancient wood.

Grain after grain of sawdust fell until, as the probe ground deeper, it began pouring in a continuous trickle upon the chair and floor. The early dusk was already dimming the spacious hall, and Crane worked quickly to end his task before Murdock appeared to turn on the lights. At last he felt the point of the knife grate against some-

thing metallic, and, with a muttered exclamation of satisfaction, he began twisting the blade in a wider circle.

"Strike something?" asked Jewett, his stolidity gone.

"I think so," Crane responded cautiously in an undertone. "That bunch still out on the porch?"

"Yes. There were only three of them before, but now there are a couple more," reported Jewett after reconnoitering. "They seem to be moving toward the door now; I guess they're breaking up. What's that? Got it?"

Crane stepped down from the chair, turned it about with its back to the wall and slid it quickly along the floor to a distance of several feet from the betraying hole. Then, closing the knife, he motioned Jewett to follow him and slipped into the conservatory. It was only when they were securely hidden from view behind a cluster of screening shrubs that he held out his hand to his companion. Upon the palm a diminutive globule of steel winked wickedly back at them.

"What's it mean?" Jewett demanded in a whisper and proceeded to answer himself. "There was two shots fired last night, and they were from different revolvers. Where's the one this came from?"

"I don't know yet, but I think that when we find it—and I am certain that it is still about the club somewhere—it will prove to be the oddest-looking weapon of its size that you ever came across. I am going to look about, and, in the meantime, I want you to find that steward. Don't let him out of your sight until I send for you."

"No fear if you mean that Murdock!" retorted Jewett. "He's been tailing me all day; I couldn't lose him for a minute, and the questions he's been asking me would fill a book. There—that must be him, now!"

During his speech the lights had sprung up in the huge circular hall, which they had just left, and Crane dropped the bullet into his vest pocket and handed the knife hastily to his companion.

"Here, Jewett, you go out first and talk to him about anything under the sun except what we've just found. Get him away to the locker room or pantries on some pretext, so that I can beat it out of here without his knowing that we have been consulting together."

"All right, Mr. Crane." Jewett grinned and added: "Judging by his complexion, I've a pretext in my hip pocket that will make him go off with me to any little quiet corner, and it's not my gat, either!"

Left alone, Crane made a careful circuit of the conservatory, dodging like a shadow from one tall shrub to another, sweeping aside the fanlike leaves of the palms where they concealed the floor. He looked searchingly into every corner, but with no success. Finally he emerged and was instantly hailed by a cluster of men who had gathered before the log fire on the hearth. Beside the Frasers and Rutherford Sowerby the group now included Samuel Estridge and a dapper young man in a Tuxedo, whom the detective recognized as Mrs. Carter's companion of that morning in the glen.

Crane strolled over to them, and Estridge presented him to Mr. Philip Dorrance, who expressed his pleasure with an obviously nervous little cough. "Just dropped in for a minute to see how the investigation into that sad affair of last night was getting on, Mr. Crane," he explained. He was slightly flushed, and his pale, prominent blue eyes gleamed with a sort of triumphant excitement. "Have to be trotting along in a few seconds. My wife and I are dining out this evening with some friends down toward Rosemere, and we must motor several miles. She sent me—I mean I came to learn if anything had been accomplished toward solving the mystery."

His loquacity and overcordiality made the detective wonder for a moment whether or not he was exhilarated solely by his nervous sensibility.

"I do not know the method of procedure followed by the local authorities, Mr. Dorrance, nor whether they are in the habit of disclosing the initial steps of their progress or not, but we do not discuss the possible clews, which we have obtained in a case, until we have reached definite results." Crane spoke in a pleasant tone, but the meaning of his words sunk in, and Dorrance's flush deepened.

"Perhaps it would have been better for this fellow Grant, or Doyle, if he had taken some one into his confidence," he replied.

"We are going to close the club on Monday for an indefinite period," Estridge announced hurriedly to Crane. "Of course Murdock will remain here in charge, and an outside man or two will be kept, but the waiters and under-stewards will go. I don't imagine that any of us will care to gather here again until the spring comes. Sowerby and I are going to dine here to-night, and, if you would care to join us——"

"Thank you, Mr. Estridge, you gentlemen are both very kind, but I have work to do and shall have time only for a hurried meal. If you will ex-

cuse me now——" The detective was retreating as gracefully as possible when Jack Fraser called after him: "None of us are going just yet, except Mr. Dorrance. If you will come into the locker room a little later perhaps we can show you something that will merit further investigation on your part!"

Crane laughed and shook his head as he disappeared into the billiard room, but the laughter died from his lips when the door had closed behind him, and he relaxed for a moment upon the leather seat which ran around the wall. For the first time he felt the inertia of mental and physical fatigue. He had frequently worked for days and nights without sleep, but then there had been some definite lead for him to go upon; now all real clews seemed to be lost in a maze of small talk and gossip of a snobbish community where not even death by violence was taken seriously and each person appeared to care only for his neighbor's opinion.

Then the detective's hand crept up to his vest pocket, and he roused himself. The bullet, which reposed there, had not killed his colleague, but if he could discover whether it had been sped by accident or design, he would have gone a long way toward simplifying the apparent multiplicity of

possible motives for the murder. Mrs. Fraser's keen wits had probed to the depths of the mystery without her even having knowledge of the loss of Mrs. de Forest's necklace; surely he, with his training and experience, was not to be baffled now!

Rising, he began pacing back and forth in the narrow aisle between two pool tables, his mind alert once more. Where, in the short space of a minute or two at most, could any one have gone from the farther side of the hall, whence had come that tiny flash of light when the shot rang out, and where, unobserved or unnoted, had he or she concealed so cumbersome an object as that which he sought? Not upstairs, for Mrs. Carter's presence upon the lowest step guarded that domain; not out to the rear of the club where a host of gossiping servants would have been waiting with curious eyes and prattling tongues, nor upon the veranda with its excited group about the dead man.

Neither could the weapon have been concealed in the conservatory nor locker room, for he had already searched both. What hiding place for it, then, remained?

Crane's eyes were lowered in thought as he paced reflectively to and fro. Suddenly he paused, and the question in his mind was answered

at last. From beneath one of the tables, resting upon the bracket provided for it, protruded the handle of the bridge used in making difficult shots. From the corresponding bracket, under the edge of the other table, there appeared a handle of quite another kind.

It was a grip of leather and slanted at a sharp angle which denoted its unusual brevity when compared to the ordinary bridge. Crane stooped and glanced beneath the table, then closed his fingers gingerly about the leather grip and drew forth a new golf club of highly polished, but singularly heavy wood.

Meanwhile the group about the fireplace in the great hall remained intact. Young Dorrance seemed to have forgotten his announced intention of immediate departure and was holding forth sarcastically about the ability of all detectives, official and private. Only the Frasers disputed with him, for Sowerby and Estridge were conversing aside in lowered tones, but all five were so deeply engrossed that they failed to observe the cat-footed Murdock when he took his accustomed place behind his desk. A tall, ungainly stranger, with whom he appeared to be upon the best of terms, lounged confidentially across the counter.

Neither did any of them become aware of the

reappearance of Crane. He passed them silently, one hand held behind him, and joined the two at the steward's desk. Jewett glanced in quick inquiry at his superior, and, when the latter nodded, he stepped aside and, entering the little office, he took up his stand directly behind Murdock, but the steward was oblivious to his presence.

He stood as though transfixed, gazing with a sort of horror at the golf club which the detective laid upon the counter before him, and it was only when Crane's voice, grown swiftly stern, rang out through the hall that the five men by the hearth ceased their several discussions and moved instinctively forward.

"Murdock, is this the golf club with which you reached out to touch that passing waiter last night, at the moment when the shot was fired?"

"I—I don't know, sir!" the wretched steward exclaimed. "I told you, sir, that I shouldn't be able to tell if I saw it again!"

"You put it back in the bag beneath the counter before you vaulted over and out to the veranda, to where Doyle's body lay?"

"Y—yes, sir!"

"Then how do you explain its presence, in place of one of the bridges, under a pool table in the billiard room?"

"I haven't the least idea, sir. The bag and all were gone when I tried to show it to you, if you recall, sir!" Murdock's ruddy face had blanched, and he was trembling visibly.

"Perhaps you could tell if this were the same club or not by taking it up and flourishing it as you did last night, Murdock." A note of command had entered the detective's tones. "Grasp it by the head."

"But I didn't, sir!" The steward's pallid face took on a waxen hue. "I must have lifted it from the bag by the head, of course, but I swung it out by the grip. I—now that I look at it, sir, I am positive that this is not the same."

"Try it and see." Crane's inexorable voice directed. "Take up that driver and show me just what you did last night!"

Murdock glanced about him wildly for a means of escape, and for the first time he became aware of the five men who had ranged themselves behind the detective. One of them uttered a startled exclamation and advanced a step or two, but at that moment the steward broke down.

"I can't, sir!" he said. "It's no use for me to bluff any longer! May God forgive me—I killed him!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE DRIVER OF DEATH

HIS dramatic confession of the murder ended in a cry that echoed back from the high-arched ceiling of the hall, and Murdock collapsed and would have fallen to the floor had not Jewett grasped him beneath the arms from behind and supported him to the chair beside the small safe.

Of the five men, standing back of Crane on the other side of the steward's desk, only Samuel Estridge strode forward. "You, Murdock?" he exclaimed. "That's stuff and nonsense! You never killed Doyle—you haven't the nerve to harm a flea!"

Jack Fraser cast a swift, troubled glance at his brother, whose face was a study. Ralph Fraser stood immovable, without meeting his eyes. Philip Dorrance had fallen back, his weak mouth beneath the small, sleek mustache, working like that of a rabbit in his startled amazement, and

old Rutherford Sowerby sputtered and snorted, but no words would come.

The steward had buried his face in his hands and was swaying back and forth. Deep sobs racked him. It was doubtful if he even heard the famous criminal lawyer's expostulation, but, when Crane spoke, the questions penetrated to his all but distraught brain.

"If you shot Doyle how did you do it, Murdock? What motive had you?"

"None, sir, I swear it!" Murdock raised a face suddenly grown old and haggard. "I don't know how I shot him. I never meant to do it! It was that devil's machine which you just laid on my desk there, sir—that thing that looks like a driver. It's some kind of a gun, and it went off in my hands!"

"Not a devil's machine, but merely, I think, a cleverly concealed weapon of unique design." Crane turned suddenly and faced Ralph Fraser. "It is the driver missing from your set of clubs, is it not, Mr. Fraser? A driver which projects not golf balls, but these!"

He held out upon his open hand the tiny steel bullet which he had pried from the oak paneling, and Ralph Fraser squared his shoulders and came forward.

"Yes, it is mine," he said. "I brought it as a surprise for my brother and his friends to see, and I never thought that an accident like this could occur! I had a mighty bad time of it after that shot sounded in my ears, I can tell you, but it didn't——"

"How was I to know he was a detective?" asked Murdock. He was too perturbed to grasp the significance of the interrupted sentence. "I never did know for sure until last night, but I suspected him from the very first day he came, and we began going over the books together. When they bring them into court, and it's proved how I've been changing the accounts right along, thieving everywhere I could, nobody ever will believe that I didn't know what that thing was—that I didn't pick it up and shoot purposely at him when the lights were out!"

"What's that!" Sowerby found his voice and emitted it in a sudden roar, as he stepped forward. "What's that about your falsifying the accounts, Murdock, and embezzling from the club?"

"It's true, sir, all of it!" Murdock replied. "All but that I meant to kill the man you put on my track! I'd have run away, maybe, but I never would have harmed him."

"Oh, I can't stand this!" Ralph Fraser broke

in impetuously. "What's the good of torturing the fellow? Crane, here, knows as well as I do that he's inno——"

"Stop!" The detective spoke in a peremptory undertone. "We'll get the confession of what he did do, Mr. Fraser, before we reassure him as to what he didn't do."

"What did you do it for, Murdock?" Estridge's persuasive voice sounded before the indignant Sowerby could bellow again. "You've been with us ever since we founded the club, and we trusted you as we would have trusted each other. You never complained about the amount of your salary. How much have you taken from us, and how long has this been going on?"

"For a little more than a year, sir, and I've kept account of every penny, meaning that you should have it back from my life insurance." Murdock's usually impassive countenance was working with emotion. "I knew how I was trusted, and I couldn't sleep nights with the shame of it, but none of you seemed to miss the money, so it didn't make me feel as bad after a time, and I went on taking more and more! I've had a matter of over two thousand dollars from the club since I started to run crooked, and nobody suspected, not even the last secretary, Martin. An

increase of salary wouldn't have helped, you see, sir; I had to have more than that, but I'd counted the cost, like any careful man would, and, if I was caught, I'd meant to take my medicine. I never intended to harm a hair of Doyle's head!"

"May I interfere for a moment, Mr. Estridge?" asked Crane. "I know this particular matter is not my province, but, in a way, it is connected with the case upon which I am working."

"Certainly, Crane. Go ahead," the lawyer responded briefly after a keen, searching glance at the other's face.

"Murdock, you say that you have kept account of every penny which you have stolen from the members of this club. Where is this account?"

"Here, sir!" Murdock thrust a trembling hand in his breast pocket and drew forth a little red notebook. Jewett took it from him and passed it across the counter to Crane. "It's got the amount and the date and the page on the club books where I changed each item. I'm glad I've told, for it is a load off my mind; but if only you could believe that I never knew what that deadly thing was when I picked it at random from the bag at my feet! 'Twas not me that killed Doyle! It was the devil himself that sped the shot!"

"No, Murdock, you did not kill Doyle! The

bullet, which flew from this concealed revolver when you accidentally released the firing pin in the head of the club is this bullet which I hold in my hand. See!" He held out the little steel globule. "It harmed no one, but imbedded itself in the oak paneling over there."

Amid amazed exclamations from all, except Ralph Fraser and Jewett, Murdock started from his chair with protruding eyes.

"You—you mean that, sir?" he asked hoarsely. "It's the truth you are telling me? I didn't kill him, after all? Oh! Thank God! Thank God!"

He sank back in his chair and buried his face in his hands, sobbing aloud in the reaction of relief, while the others crowded around Crane with excited questions.

"What does this mean?" Sowerby's voice rose above the rest.

"It means, gentlemen, that two shots were fired simultaneously, this one, by the miracle of accident, going off at the same instant as the other. But I will explain later. Murdock, the story you told me was partly the truth, then?"

"Yes, sir, partly." Murdock wiped his eyes and straightened in his chair. "I told you the truth, but not all of it. The lights were lowered, and the singing was going on. I saw that waiter

from the caterer's starting to pass my desk on his way to the supper room. Thinking to stop him from disturbing a minute that was as sacred as church, I reached down into the golf bag. Somebody had left it under the counter for safe-keeping, instead of taking it to the locker room where it properly belonged. This instrument of Satan was the first stick which came to my hand, and I took hold of it, without looking, and drew it out. I only meant to tap the fellow on the arm with it and motion him back, and it all happened in a minute, though it takes long to tell it. As I grabbed it I must have flourished it in the air, for I felt something jump under the head, there was a wee flash of light in front of me, and then there came a crash fit to wake the dead. You gentlemen all know what happened after that; the sound of something falling outside and the excitement and the lights going up once more and everybody crowding out on the veranda. I rushed out with the rest, but, when I saw what I'd done—or thought, until a minute ago, that I'd done—something seemed to die inside of me, too, and then I remembered that I still had in my hand the thing that had fired the shot. I was fairly crazed to get rid of it, and there wasn't time to put it back in the bag. Before anybody took hold of the

affair and began to give orders I ran back into the billiard room and pushed the club under one of the tables, with the grip leaning on an empty bridge rest. No one missed me or knew that I had touched any of the clubs under my desk, until Mr. Crane suspected."

"You changed the books and stole from our accounts," Estridge observed, as though he had not been following the explanation of the previous night's event. "Did you pilfer anything from the lockers, or the ladies' dressing rooms, or pick up any articles of value that the members may have dropped?"

"No, sir. I've found things from time to time, like Mr. Sowerby's scarfpin and Mrs. Dorrance's gold bag, but they've always been promptly posted on the bulletin board," responded Murdock. "Somehow it didn't seem like stealing, just to alter the books, especially as none of you missed the few dollars that meant so much to me."

"Then you have never retained unlawful possession of anything belonging to a club member, whether its disappearance was mentioned or not?" the lawyer asked.

"Never, sir. I—I've told you everything. I can't restore the money now, but I'm ready to make whatever amends you gentlemen and the

law require of me." He buried his head again in his hands. "I might have known that I would be caught, sooner or later, but I had no choice."

"Why?" Estridge asked again. "Why have you needed so much extra money during this past year? After your years of faithful service, Murdock, why didn't you come to one of us for a loan?"

"I couldn't, sir, without explaining what I wanted it for, and that would have been as much as my position here was worth. Besides I expected each month to recoup."

"You were gambling?" The lawyer's tone was sharpened with incredulity, and even Sowerby looked his amazement. Murdock's native Scotch thrift and canniness had become proverbial around the club.

"Well, sir, you might call it that, in a manner of speaking." The steward hesitated. "I—I acted on some tips which came my way in a fashion that I can't explain, and I won just enough now and then to make me keep on, thinking that one more, a flyer would not only let me put back all I had taken, but leave me a bit more."

"'A flyer?'" repeated Sowerby. "You were playing the stock market, Murdock? Who gave

you the tips? If you are frank with us we may come to some arrangement."

Murdock shook his head, and his rugged jaw set. "I'm sorry, sir," he said decidedly. "All my own savings went with what I took from the club accounts, or I could make a partial restitution. It was the stock market, but I can't tell you where the tips came from, nor how I got them. 'Twas my own savings that went first, before I thought of tampering with the books, but well I know that is no excuse. There's nothing more that I can say, sir. I've confessed, and I'm ready to go to prison."

Motioning to Jewett to stand guard over him, Crane turned to the others. "Gentlemen, we have just time for a brief conference before your dinner engagements. Shall we adjoin to the billiard room?"

"Not I!" Philip Dorrance exclaimed in some haste. "It is a wonder that my wife has not telephoned for me before this. You won't mind, I'm sure, if I trot along?"

No one evincing the slightest interest in his continued presence, the young man took his departure, and Crane picked up the driver from the desk and led the way to the billiard room.

"It seems incredible!" Jack Fraser ejaculated. "I could swear that I only heard one shot. The chances are a million to one against such a coincidence."

"The odds are not as great as that," observed Estridge thoughtfully. "I have seen things proved in court, in more cases than one, which apparently only a miracle could have brought to pass. We will have to decide later what is to be done about Murdock's falsification of the accounts, but I am inclined to believe his story of the accidental shooting. Mr. Fraser can tell us if he did leave his golf bag containing that freak weapon behind the desk."

Ralph Fraser nodded. "I did," he affirmed. "We arrived late, and, as I had that dance with my sister-in-law, I did not wait to go to the locker-room, but leaned over and rested my bag under the counter. I didn't dream that any one would molest it, for Jack had mentioned that he often did this when he was in a hurry. I handed my coat and hat to the nearest steward. It was criminally careless of me to have left the gun loaded, of course, but that was sheer vanity on my part; I wanted to take it somewhere out on the green to-morrow, where it would be safe, to astonish my brother and you gentlemen with a

little impromptu target practice. I can tell you that, until the coroner stated this morning that the bullet which killed your man was a .32 I've been through Hades!''

''Where did you get the thing, anyway?'' Jack asked. ''How does it work?''

''One of the head officials of a big firearms company—I gave him my word not to mention his name, and, as no actual harm has been done except to an oak panel and the nervous system of the steward, to say nothing of my own, I think I may be permitted to keep my promise—is a bug on golf, and he doped this out merely as a curiosity. I happened to be in a position to do a favor for him, and, knowing my hobby, he presented it to me.'' Ralph Fraser took up the club from where Crane had placed it on a billiard table. ''Don't be alarmed, gentlemen, I know how to handle it safely. It really is shaped precisely like a driver, you see, but there is a hollow metal tube or barrel, concealed in the shaft, and, when the head is pressed in a certain way, it releases a firing pin which discharges a .22 caliber bullet through the grip. My friend tried to work it out with a trigger, but it wasn't practicable. I thought it a mighty neat little contrivance and an interesting addition to my collection, but, after last night, I

never want to see the wretched thing again!"

He laid it down once more upon the table and Estridge remarked dryly: "It is ingenious, at all events. I thought I had come in contact with most styles of man-killing instruments in my professional career, but this is unique."

"It is a devilish sort of contrivance, and I think we can dispense with any further demonstration of it, if you don't mind my saying so, Fraser," said Sowerby. "I hope you'll keep it under your eye until you get it away from the club."

"Still, you gentlemen owe Mr. Fraser a vote of thanks in a way," Crane observed. "It was this device of his which unwittingly scared the steward into his admission of theft."

"Do you think his confession was complete?" Jack Fraser asked significantly. "Granted that he was unnerved he is a canny sort of rascal. Was that embezzlement the only robbery which he committed, or attempted to commit?"

Estridge glanced in quick warning from the speaker to his brother. At the same moment an under-steward knocked upon the door.

"Excuse me, please, sir." His eyes wavered and then rested upon the detective. "Mr. Dorrance is on the wire for Mr. Crane. I told him

that you were engaged, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He says it is most important."

"What does that little——" Sowerby was beginning, but Crane had already started for the door.

"Just pardon me," he remarked, "the question of Murdock is a matter for the officers of your club to decide, but I cannot afford to leave a possible stone unturned in the affair which brought me out here. The other matter, of which three of you four know, is also extraneous. I am here for the sole purpose of finding the murderer of Jim Doyle!"

CHAPTER XIV

TELLTALE NUMERALS

THE lawyer turned to the under-steward. "Henry, upon what telephone did Mr. Dorrance call up?"

"The main one, sir, on Murdock's desk," Henry replied.

"Perhaps Mr. Crane would prefer to have it switched to one of the extensions in the locker room?" the lawyer suggested.

"Isn't there an extension, also, in the office which was occupied by Martin and the late—er—Grant?" Crane had paused in the doorway.

"Yes. Would you care to use that?" asked Estridge. "The office has been locked since last night, but I have the key here."

"Then will you have Henry switch the call to that extension, please, and cut off all other connections in the club for a few minutes?" As the under-steward disappeared at a nod from the lawyer, Crane added: "Also, if you have the

combination to the safe in the secretary's office and keys to the desk, or any other receptacles which may be locked in there, I should like to have them."

"I can give you the combination to the safe, of course, unless Doyle changed it, and, although the coroner must have the keys which were taken from the body, I have a duplicate set here," Estridge remarked, as the two proceeded to the little office. "Do you want to compare the accounts with the memoranda in Murdock's notebook?"

"Only one or two items to assure myself that he wasn't lying in general; the rest of his confession doesn't interest me," responded the detective. "I hope to find some private notes of Doyle's—notes intended for our agency and jotted down too late to be transmitted to us."

Murdock was still seated behind his desk with his head bowed in his hands, and Jewett loitered near, but the steward did not look up nor appear to be conscious of their presence in the rotunda, as Estridge unlocked the door of the other little office, and they entered, the lawyer switching on the light.

"Your man was methodical and businesslike," the latter observed. "When I went to O'Hare I told him to send me down some one who could, at

least, act the part and keep books after a fashion. But that fellow would have deceived even me, had I not known who he was! He might have been a private secretary or bookkeeper all his life!"

Crane smiled. "Doyle has acted in both capacities, at one time or another, before he came to us," he said. "That was the reason why the old man picked him for this case."

"But why the disguise? I am sure none of us would have recognized him as he appeared when it was removed."

"How sure are you?" Crane ignored the impatient insistence of the telephone extension on the desk to inquire quizzically, "Have the clients you have defended in court all come from the underworld, Mr. Estridge? One would not think so, judging from your financial rating."

The attorney looked startled. "Just what do you mean?"

"Doyle has run to earth more than one crook in the so-called smart set, and he once helped to convict of murder the leading banker of a small suburban community," replied the detective. "Naturally, before selecting a man for your job, O'Hare had you all looked up as to general standing, and he discovered that you were all practical newcomers here, Mr. Estridge. Doyle was the

best man for the case, but was it improbable to conjecture that, among all the members of your club and their transient guests, there might not be one who had come into contact with him in some other investigation he has conducted among people of your class? The world is not so wide, as a certain member of your club remarked this morning."

"There's something in that," Estridge conceded, as he turned to the door. "You'll find me in the billiard room, or dining with Sowerby, if you need me, Crane."

The detective reversed the key and locked himself into the cubby-hole of an office before he took the receiver of the telephone from the hook.

"Hello! Crane speaking."

"What detained you all this time?" The peevish voice of Philip Dorrance, raised to a high pitch of mental strain, came to him over the wire, and it seemed to the detective's keen ear that deeper, but unmistakably feminine, tones mingled, as in a running undercurrent, with those of the speaker. "We have something of the most vital importance to tell you, and my wife would like you to come at once!"

"But your dinner engagement?" Crane could not resist the suggestion.

"Hang the dinner! We're not going! When I reached home I found that my wife had made a discovery which requires the immediate services of a detective, and you are the nearest. We don't care what it costs." There was an odd hesitation, a seeming reluctance in Dorrance's tones, in spite of his insistence, and now he paused while the contralto feminine voice sounded again. The words were indistinguishable, but it was obvious that he was being coached.

"If Mrs. Dorrance's discovery has no direct bearing on the matter I am investigating I really must decline," Crane said firmly. "O'Hare's private agency in New York, from which I came, will send a man out to you on the first train if you will telephone there and state the nature of your prospective case. The one I am working on is of more importance to me than any fee."

"But this is something that cannot be discussed over the phone, and my wife thinks that it may have a direct bearing on the other affair!" Dorrance's voice rose sharply, and, after a moment, he added: "She says to tell you she is positive that it will change the whole course of your investigation, and she is sending the motor for you."

"Thanks, but I have two cars here of my own," responded the detective dryly. "Please give my

compliments to Mrs. Dorrance and tell her that I have one or two points to look into before I leave the club. I shall be grateful for any assistance she may be able to render me in this case, of course, and I will be with you later."

"You must come now, man, I tell you!" The wire squeaked with Dorrance's agitation. "My wife demands it! You are wasting your time until you hear what she has to tell you!"

"You will pardon me, but I must be the best judge of that since the investigation is in my hands," Crane retorted. "I can be with you in an hour, not before."

He rang off abruptly, heedless of the sputtered protestations which were choked into silence, and looked about him. The desk was not unlike that of a hotel office and identical with Murdock's except that it ran the length of the small room, with a space in front of it for the convenience of members, and was in a separate apartment instead of opening directly into the great hall. The wicket was barred, too, but Crane quickly unlocked it with a key from among those which, together with a slip of paper, the attorney had placed upon the counter before he passed within.

The safe was larger and of a different model than that in the steward's office. As Crane had

anticipated it would not open when he worked the combination on the paper which Estridge had left, and he glanced about for some clew to the change in numbers which Doyle must have made. Methodical in all things the late operative, foreseeing the possibility of an attack upon him and the coming of a successor, must have prepared some hint for a trained eye of the change he had effected.

The first object which met his gaze was a large rack for mail with numbered pigeonholes on the wall above the empty chair. It was identical with the rack in Murdock's office, but Crane remembered that the latter had been new and highly varnished, with envelopes protruding here and there, where the members had forgotten to inquire for their mail. This one was old and dusty, yet, in a series of the compartments, small white cards had been placed.

Carefully noting the number of the pigeonhole from which he removed it, Crane picked out one of the cards and found it to be, significantly enough, a left-over invitation to the Harvest Dance, during which Mrs. de Forest's necklace had disappeared. That which interested him more, however, was an annotation down in one corner in hand-printed characters: "L-7."

Taking a pencil from his pocket Crane jotted down after the characters the number 2—that of the compartment from which he had taken the card. Then he collected the others, adding the numbers in turn.

There were eight cards in all. Seating himself in the chair, he spread them out on the counter before him like a new and unique game of solitaire. For a time he studied them with a puzzled frown, then his brow cleared, and, as he rearranged them, he whistled softly.

He had taken the card marked "L-7" from the second pigeonhole; others were labeled with the letter "R" before the various numbers. These ranged in scattered order from 3 to 14. Assuming that they actually represented the new combination of the safe, Crane considered it as a first supposition that "L" and "R" represented a turn of the knob to the left or right as indicated; that the numbers of the pigeonholes, from which he had taken them, was the order in which the turns were to be made, and those upon the cards themselves must correspond to the figures on the dial.

This theory was further strengthened by the discovery upon the last card—that marked "L-6" —of a word faintly penciled in the same small,

hand-printed characters; "open." Surely that could only apply to the knob in the center of the dial and must mean that the combination had been completed!

Crane rose and, kneeling upon the floor before the safe, he spread out his cards in a row—all in the order of the numbered compartments in the rack from which he had removed them. Arranged thus they read: "R-4; L-7; R-9; L-3; R-8; L-11; R-14; L-6." Placing his ear close, he turned the knob from zero to the number 4 on the right of the dial and felt a glow of satisfaction as he caught faintly the fall of a tumbler within. A quick twist of his wrist brought the knob back to number 7 on the left. In rotation through the other figures, printed on the cards, each stop produced that scarcely audible click which assured him that he was indeed upon the right track.

When the eighth number had been reached the door of the safe swung open, and Crane gathered up his cards before he looked within at the orderly piles of ledgers and account books, each marked with the month and year, with which the receptacle was half filled.

Selecting two or three of the latter at random, the detective took from his pocket the notebook which Murdock had surrendered to him. A rapid

comparison of a few of the items listed by the steward with the figures in the club accounts proved that the latter had told the truth, in part at least, and Crane laid them aside, but not before ascertaining one significant fact; since the date of Doyle's arrival, a month previous, not a single peculation had been committed by Murdock.

Turning once more to the safe, Crane searched for the private notes of which he had spoken to Estridge. He was certain that Doyle must have taken notes, had anything, bearing upon his investigation, occurred during the last hours prior to his death. Before starting from the agency in town, Crane had run hastily through the brief reports sent in by Doyle from time to time, and it was evident from them that the operative had obtained no definite lead regarding the identity of the thief he had come to track down, unless he had done so after mailing the last report which had been received on the Tuesday before.

In none of them had he mentioned the possibility of an attack upon himself, but that would not have been Doyle's way; he had undertaken to recover the necklace and capture the thief. Any physical danger incurred in the commission of a case he had always persisted in regarding as his

own private business and no affair of the agency, in spite of O'Hare's repeated warnings.

Crane ruffled the leaves of every ledger and examined all the packets and envelopes in the compartments which lined the upper part of the safe, but without success. Surely Doyle must have had some reason of his own for changing the combination of the safe, and if he made any note in the case, which he had not had time to post, he would have secreted them in this safe. Had any papers been found on the body Crane was confident that the coroner would have mentioned them to him that morning. Where could they be?

Even as he racked his brains for a solution to the problem the detective noticed that the ledger for the past month, which he had previously examined and laid beside him on the floor, did not close as evenly as the rest. Taking it up again, he eagerly examined the binding. The inner lining of the board back had been slit at the top, and, as he handled it, something rustled in the space between.

Taking out his stout pocketknife, Crane ripped the lining down each side, disclosing a single sheet of paper which had been inserted in the aperture next to the back. It was covered with disjointed

notes in Doyle's writing, but it was manifest that they must have been jotted down in haste and under a state of excitement which had been unusual to that impassive operative. Although rumpled the paper was fresh, and the ink, which had been used for the added lines at the bottom of the page, was not as deeply black as the rest.

Crane spread the document out on the counter and dropped into his chair. Here is what he saw:

17-L & 31-G having affair, 31 more serious than 17. Look up 19-N; sort of Cinderella and stuck on 16-G.

10-L & 12-G engaged? 10 don't trust me & face seems familiar, but can't place her yet; 12 shy of me, too, must look up his record.

16-G is o.k. In love with 19-N, all right & no cap, but straight. Most likely subject at first, so fooled around golf green with him & tried him out. N. D.

17-L afraid of me but more afraid of 28-G. 31-G leery of me.

Club accounts altered, but only small sums taken at a time. Think M. is the man—too anxious to help me with books. Not nerve enough for big job.

31-G more worried. Sounded 10-L but still can't get her number.

Oct. 29: 31-G desperate for money. Sure M. on that I'm dick, but thinks put here to check up books. 19-N & 16-G nervous.

Oct. 30: 31-G tried to bribe me for all money in club under my care and for me to make get-away. Offered 1st mortgage on property, but happen to know it is in name of 5-L. 19-N & 16-G avoid each other like plague; up to some mischief. Possible subjects to date: 17-L; 12-G; 31-G; 19-N, & M as long shot. 12-G watching me now from hall.

Oct. 31: 12-G giving me the eye again, this time through window from porch, where M. has hung Jap. lantern. Dance coming off soon.

What is 19-N doing under lant——

Here the cryptic scrawl broke off abruptly, as though the writer had been interrupted at his task, and for some moments Crane sat staring in bewilderment at it. Clearly Doyle had meant it as a correlation of facts and observations for his own study alone, yet there must be some key to the enigma which this fresh set of numbers presented.

"10-L" was evidently a woman, since the operative had not been able to place her, and "12-G" was as obviously a man, as Doyle had made a note to look up his record. "M" was designated with no number, and, if "L" could be assumed as a starter to indicate lady and "G" gentlemen, what could "19-N" mean?

The detective rose and began pacing the small inclosure reflectively. For the time being the urgent summons from the Dorrances was forgotten, as was the lesser importance of his own lack of food and brain fag from loss of sleep. If Doyle had intended those notes for himself alone why on earth hadn't he written the names, or at least initials? He had hidden the single page with extreme care, yet he had left an ingenious clew

to the changed combination, and the safe itself contained nothing else which the house committee might not freely have examined.

Where had he got those infernal numbers, anyway? Surely he would not have resorted to those on the pigeonholes of the mail rack again. Crane turned and studied it for a moment, but the numbers, when applied to the document in his hands, made no sense, and impatiently he resorted once more to a perusal of the latter.

The only person with whom Doyle had "fooled around the golf green" was young Landon; he, therefore, must be "16-G," and "19-N," with whom the latter was in love, could be none other than little Alice Dare, the "sort of Cinderella." "M" was undoubtedly Murdock, but what were those numbers and how had Doyle come to apply them?

All at once a light broke over him. Gathering up the ledgers, he thrust them back in the safe and closed it. He had barely straightened when a knock sounded upon the door.

Vaulting the counter, Crane unlocked it to find the under-steward, Henry, standing upon the threshold, a laden tray in his hands, from which savory odors arose. "Mr. Estridge's compliments, sir, but the dining room is closed, and we've

kept this hot for you as long as we could. Mr. Dorrance has telephoned again, but Mr. Estridge gave orders that you were not to be disturbed."

Realizing all at once that he was voraciously hungry, Crane expressed his thanks and added: "Henry, the lockers, in which the members keep their golf clubs and extra things, are numbered, are they not?"

The man looked his surprise, but replied promptly enough. "Yes, sir, both in the ladies' and gentlemen's locker rooms."

"Do you know to whom each belongs?"

Henry permitted himself to smile discreetly. "I ought to, sir. They have been under my special charge, as you might say, for the past two years. I've a list of the members with the numbers of their lockers, if you would care to see it."

"I should, very much. Will you bring it to me now, please, and then give orders to have my larger car—the one in which I came out from town last night—at the veranda steps in fifteen minutes? Where is Mr. Estridge?"

"In the billiard room, sir. I will get the list at once and see that your car is ready on time."

Crane attacked the contents of the tray with

such vigor that he was halfway through his meal when the steward returned, and, as the latter closed the door behind him again, the detective drew Doyle's notes from his pocket and compared them with the list of lockers.

The meaning leaped out at him now in all clarity, and he whistled softly as he read. Of the ladies Mrs. Sowerby had locker No. 17, Mrs. Dorrance No. 5, Mrs. de Forest No. 19, and Mrs. Carter No. 10. In the men's room Bowles' locker was number 12, Landon's 16, Dorrance's 32, and Sowerby's 28.

"Ah!" said Crane to himself. "It didn't take Doyle long to discover that Mrs. Sowerby and Dorrance were having a flirtation, to say nothing of Mrs. Carter and Bowles, and that love affair between the two young kids. But why was Bowles shy of him?"

Pausing only to copy on the back of Doyle's notes the names of those whose locker numbers the late operative had mentioned, Crane replaced the sheet of paper in his pocket and then finished his dinner hastily. He rang for the steward to remove the tray, returned the list to him, and, locking the door of the little office, he sought the billiard room. "Mr. Estridge, I want to thank

you most heartily for your thoughtfulness. But for you I should have had no dinner, for I had quite forgotten all about food."

The attorney, who had been knocking the balls aimlessly about on one of the tables in solitude, glanced up and laid down his cue.

"You found something to interest you?" he asked.

"Very much so!" replied Crane. "I'd like a little chat with you some time to-morrow, if I may have it, but now I want to return to you the keys you lent me and give Murdock's notebook into your possession. You'll find, I think, that his itemized list of peculations is correct in the main, but you won't be able to open the safe with the combination you handed me. I'll give you the real one to-morrow."

"I thought so!" Estridge said. "I have some notes to prepare on a case of my own which comes up next week, and you will find me at my lodge all day."

Crane took leave of him and proceeded to his waiting car, but, as he tore through the night toward the Dorrances', that unfinished final sentence scrawled by Doyle rang in the detective's ears, as though the lips now cold in death were

whispering them! "What is 19-N doing under lant——"

What, indeed, had Alice Dare, the pauper niece of Mrs. de Forest, been doing beneath the dragon lantern, wherein had been coiled her aunt's stolen necklace?

CHAPTER XV

MRS. DORRANCE ADVANCES A THEORY

EVEN had he not mentally noted its general location that afternoon Crane could not have failed to find the Dorrance's pretentious house. It was illuminated so brilliantly that it stood out in all the ugliness of its hybrid architecture against the night sky, and, as Crane whirled up the driveway, the entrance door was flung open, and Philip Dorrance's figure, prancing excitedly, was silhouetted against the glare from within.

"Great Scott, why didn't you come sooner, Crane?" He seized the detective's arm, before the latter had fairly reached the top step of the veranda, and dragged him in. "My wife has been like a mad woman! You said an hour, and here it is nearly midnight, and some officious fool at the club refused to put you on the wire again!"

"I told you, Mr. Dorrance, that I had one or two points to clear up there before I left, although I did not anticipate being detained so long," Crane

responded, adding: "Perhaps I have come too late, and Mrs. Dorrance has retired?"

"'Retired!' repeated the other with a gurgle. "You don't know my wife when she gets going, but you will! Come along; she's in the drawing-room."

As he followed his host the detective amusedly noted the change in his appearance from a few hours before. His tie was twisted, his collar and shirt front wilted, and instead of his usual jaunty strut, he sidled cringingly down the hall. The latter, although spacious enough, was cluttered with spurious armor, chairs, and settles copied from every known period, and hung with portraits, the suspiciously shiny varnish of which belied the antiquity of the costumed characters they represented.

The apartment which they entered was large, and had manifestly been "done" by some interior decorator with an eye to his client's purse solely, but here the details of his immediate surroundings escaped Crane's observation for the moment.

Wide as the drawing-room was it seemed to be filled with the ponderous bulk of the beetle-browed woman who in disheveled evening dress was pacing heavily back and forth. Mentally the detective flattened himself against the wall. The lady

paused and demanded in a deep, shaking voice: "Is this Mr. Crane? You have come at last!"

"I am sorry I could not get here before, Mrs. Dorrance." He bowed. "It is an unconscionable hour to call at your home—even upon such business as mine."

"Hour! What do hours matter, or anything else in the world!" She flung her arms out with such violence that the threads of one shoulder strap snapped ominously. "There is a thief abroad in our community, Mr. Crane! A robber who would stop at a crime of no magnitude!"

"Now, Josephine!" said her husband in what was meant to be a soothing tone, but she turned upon him. "Hold your tongue, Philip, or go to bed! Were they your jewels, I should like to know? I shall tell this person just what I think, and nothing can stop me!"

In spite of himself Crane started slightly. Could she have heard of the theft of the necklace? If so why should she become so wrought up over another woman's loss? But he was vouchsafed no time for idle conjecture.

"Mr. Crane, I do not know why your unfortunate predecessor came to Broadlawns, but, after a certain conversation, immediately following the tragedy at the club last night, I had an inkling.

I was standing beside the chair of an elderly friend who has—or had—a diamond necklace of which she was inordinately vain. She has exhibited it on every possible occasion, until last evening. Two days ago she told me that she considered it too gorgeous to wear to so small an affair as the dance, but I was convinced then that she was not telling the truth, particularly as she made some catty remark about my emeralds!" The lady paused and then broke out in a throaty wail: "My emeralds! My emeralds which have been in the Farr family for generations! Oh, this will kill me!"

"Then you might just as well die sitting down as standing up, Josephine," Philip Dorrance exclaimed in a sudden burst of spirit, born of nerves strained to the breaking point. "It doesn't matter about me, of course, but Mr. Crane had no sleep last night, and he has been on the go all day. In common humanity you might offer him a chair."

"Upstart!" Mrs. Dorrance remarked in what was intended to be an aside, but she turned once more to the detective with a visible effort at self-control. "I beg your pardon. Please be seated; my own agitation, which my husband seemingly does not share, will not permit me to remain quiet. I was standing beside this elderly friend when

the sheriff approached her, and, to my astonishment, I heard her say that she felt herself partly responsible for the death of the young man whom we had known as Mr. Grant. Her contrition vanished in elated astonishment, however, when the sheriff told her that Grant had succeeded in what he had undertaken. Then he and Mr. Estridge carried her off to talk privately with her, and, on learning that the supposed secretary was in reality a detective, I commenced to put two and two together.

"This friend of mine had worn her necklace to the dance in September, but she left early in great agitation. There was some sort of a scene which was kept as quiet as possible. I had noticed the necklace particularly on her arrival—no one could help it—it made a display that was almost vulgar on a person of her age! I remembered distinctly that I had not seen it when she departed, for I assisted in putting her cloak about her shoulders. Nothing but theft could bring a detective to our eminently select country club, and no theft could be of much concern nor so closely connected with my friend, as to make her feel partly responsible for that detective's death but the loss of her greatest treasure. Am I not right, Mr. Crane?"

"My dear Mrs. Dorrance, I am not here in Broadlawns on the same mission as my colleague was, but solely to investigate his murder," Crane responded firmly. "I must decline to discuss anything else."

"That girl Alice Dare would neither affirm nor deny my supposition when I called on her aunt to-day, and she received me in Mrs. de Forest's place, but I am confident that she knew! Perhaps it will repay her when you learn what I have to tell you!" There was morbid triumph in Mrs. Dorrance's husky tones. "If Mrs. de Forest's necklace was actually stolen, and your associate killed because he had discovered the identity of the thief, then you would do well to guard my house, for I, too, have been robbed, and we are all likely to be murdered in our beds! My precious emeralds are gone!"

"Your emeralds!" the detective exclaimed. "That is most unfortunate, and you have my deepest sympathy, but I scarcely see how that has any bearing on the identity of my colleague's murderer."

"The emeralds are not gone, exactly, but Harlier, the jeweler, claims that some time during the past month they have been taken from their original settings and fakes substituted in their

place," Dorrance explained in a hurried tone. "They were cleaned in his establishment, just before the dance in September, and nothing was found to be wrong with them then, but my wife got a notion a day or so ago that some of the settings might be loose, so I took them into Harlier's again. A man from there telephoned out and told Mrs. Dorrance of the substitution, while I was returning from the club late this afternoon, and she is convinced that it has something to do with the theft of Mrs. de Forest's necklace and the killing of your man last night. Nothing would do but I must send for you at once. You see?"

His voice was almost apologetic, but Crane shook his head. "I am afraid that I don't," he disclaimed. "Mrs. Dorrance has given me no valid reason for her suspicion that the necklace you speak of was stolen, or that my colleague was sent here to find it. I cannot discuss his case, as I said before, but, with my own knowledge of it, I can see no connection between the identity of his slayer and that of the person who effected the substitution of fakes for your emeralds."

"You cannot?" Mrs. Dorrance, who for the moment had subsided, spent with her emotions, started up indignantly. "What if I should tell you I happen to know the necklace was stolen,

know that man was sent here to find it, and that he was shot after he did find it? His murderer is still at large, and another robbery of greater magnitude has been discovered, and you see no connection! To say the least I am disappointed, Mr. Crane, for I had heard some really intelligent things of you!"

"If your knowledge were authentic, Mrs. Dorrance—which I do not admit—I should have to know how you came by it before changing my plans and theories." Crane's tone was a study in skepticism as he warily led her on. "Woman's intuition may be all very well in its way, but you have given me only one fact: that fakes have been substituted for your emeralds. In the investigation of a murder we must have cold facts to go upon."

"'Woman's intuition' indeed!" Something very like a snort was emitted by his affronted hostess. "I have heard that you detectives depend more than a little for valuable clews on backstairs gossip—the testimony of servants. I pay mine better than any one in the neighborhood, though Heaven knows I have nothing to conceal, and I am rewarded by the only loyalty which seems to exist nowadays. I could tell you things!"

"Josephine!" exclaimed her husband. "Re-

member that you have had to pay costs already in two suits for libel and one for malicious mischief!"

"That will do." Mrs. Dorrance's tone was ominously quiet. "You will remember, Philip, that it was I and not you who paid the costs. The hussies were guilty in each case. I am conducting this interview. Mr. Crane, you must know from your professional experience that servants will talk, and nothing—positively nothing—can be kept from them. Concerning Mrs. de Forest's necklace, her maid and mine are intimate friends, but mine receives higher wages. Need I be more explicit?"

"I think I understand," Crane said. "But, after all, a maid's suspicions and predilection for sensational gossip, of which you have just spoken ——"

"I am speaking now of facts, not suspicions, and both maids are reliable witnesses. I do not care to be brought into this matter any further than is necessary to recover my own jewels, naturally, for what would be added glory for you in your profession would ostracize me in my set out here, and what I say to you now must be strictly confidential. I have locked the doors leading to

the servants' wing, and my husband doesn't count, for he would not dare to repeat anything. Mrs. de Forest's necklace is safe in the hands of the sheriff, and, knowing that, she would not be inclined to tell you whom she suspected of stealing it, nor help you in your search for Doyle's murderer, lest it bring upon her own household the scandal and disgrace she has done everything to avoid."

"Oh, Heavens!" exclaimed the wretched Philip, but his ejaculation was unheeded.

"Love," Mrs. Dorrance continued—her austere tone conveyed no impression of that tender passion—"will sometimes cause impulsive young people to do desperate, even criminal, things. Mrs. de Forest treats that orphan niece of hers like an upper servant and has provided her with smart clothes and the outward advantage of wealth, only that the girl might the more quickly make a rich marriage and be off her hands. I have this from her own lips, Mr. Crane. The girl has rewarded her by falling in love with a penniless bank clerk; all Broadlawns can substantiate that. Mrs. de Forest forbade the match, and the young couple were desperate. On reaching home from the Harvest dance Mrs. de Forest accused her niece

—in the hearing of another person, although she did not know it—of stealing her necklace. Alice denied it, of course, and threatened to go away and earn her own living and be free.

"I did not learn this until a week later, and, in the meantime, I foolishly decked the girl out in my emeralds for a masquerade at a week-end house party. I make no direct accusation, but I have heard that clever work can be done by expert jewel fakers in three days, and this house party in the Berkshires lasted from Friday until Monday. When the emeralds were returned to me I put them away without a close inspection, and it was only a few days ago that I discovered that the settings of the brooch and pendant were loose. Lately Alice Dare and her lover have given every evidence of a nervousness that amounted to sheer fright; a dozen people have remarked upon it at the club. Last night, after that murder, when Mrs. de Forest and her niece returned to their home there was another scene between them. Mrs. de Forest this time accused her niece of putting the necklace back where—where Doyle must have found it. I saw the girl in the early part of the evening dawdling about the very window through which he was afterward shot. I hope that I am unprejudiced and just, but these are facts which

I have given you. Do they interest you sufficiently to listen to my theory of the murder?"

Crane had attended to every word, and again Doyle's interrupted question leaped to his mind, although instinctively he shrank from the possibility which this dominant woman had laid bare. Neither face nor voice betrayed him as he replied calmly: "Your facts might interest me, Mrs. Dorrance, if it were not for a seeming inconsistency. Why is the necklace, which you say is now in the hands of the sheriff, not a fake, as well as your emeralds?"

"If you have had any experience with gem thefts you should know that diamonds are the most difficult jewels in the world to imitate with any hope of deceiving even the most casual glance, while it would take an expert to detect the difference between real emeralds and some of the marvelous manufactured ones which are on the market now," Mrs. Dorrance remarked coldly. "Moreover—but that is a part of my theory which you evidently do not consider worth hearing."

"Most assuredly I do, Mrs. Dorrance, but first let me warn you that you have not a shred of even circumstantial evidence to support your idea as to when and by whom your emeralds were substituted. With that theory fixed in your mind you

may have overlooked other possibilities, and, as you say, you desire above all things to be just, especially in so serious a matter."

Mrs. Dorrance's jaw set, and for an instant her dark eyes flashed. Then she controlled herself and responded: "Quite so! May I ask what other possibilities you suggest, Mr. Crane?"

"Where do you keep your emeralds when you are not wearing them? At a bank here or in town?"

"Neither. I have a fireproof safe, built into my dressing-room wall, and no one on this earth knows the combination except myself."

"Josephine!" that gentleman exclaimed in shocked reproach. "I trust you don't suggest ——"

"I suggest nothing!" she said. "Whenever I go to that safe I lock my door and hang a dark cloth over the knob so that my maid cannot spy upon me through the keyhole, and that woman knows more than you ever will, Philip! If I told you one half of what she has repeated to me concerning the actions of certain empty-headed dolls and dyed-haired vixens in this neighborhood you would realize that nothing can be kept from her—nothing but the combination of my safe!"

"On returning from the Harvest dance you

put your jewels immediately away, Mrs. Dorrance?"

"Yes. I did not open the safe until a few days later when I took out the emeralds to lend to Miss Dare."

"When she returned them——"

"I placed them in the safe so quickly that, as I told you, I scarcely looked at them, beyond a glance to see that all the pieces were there. The safe remained closed until I took out the emeralds, a few days ago, to see that all the settings were secure before wearing them to the dance. Harlier's are always very prompt in their work for me, and I thought it odd when, on Thursday, they told my husband that the repairs could not be finished in time. The official explained this afternoon that they had not wished to alarm me until they had examined every stone to determine if all or only a part of the set had been exchanged for imitations. Not one of them is left, Mr. Crane! All—all of them are gone!"

Philip, who at the reference to "dolls" and "vixens" had subsided, now interposed.

"I thought myself that the chap's manner at Harlier's was odd when I took the emeralds in to him on Thursday," he observed. "As soon as the inquest is over I mean to have a thorough in-

vestigation made of the substitution, Josephine. You can safely leave everything in my hands."

"What! Trust you to find my emeralds for me?" his wife demanded in contemptuous wrath. "I want the most expert advice in the country, both detective and legal, and I intend to have it! Moreover, as soon as this stupid inquest is finished, I shall take the first train to town and interview the head of Harlier's himself! I am convinced, however, that my theory will prove to be the truth."

"Will you tell me that theory now, Mrs. Dorrance?" asked Crane. "I know part of it, of course. You think that, some time during the Harvest dance, Miss Dare managed to steal her aunt's necklace."

"Yes; I believe that she was afraid to take it home, or confess to her lover then what she had done, but secreted it about the club somewhere. A girl values the good opinion of the man she cares for, and I think she meant to sell the necklace at the first opportunity to get to town, persuade Gerald Landon to elope with her, and then produce the money with some trumpery, romantic story of a legacy which she had concealed from her aunt. He is sufficiently young and in love to have swallowed it. However, her aunt's unexpected accu-

sation must have thrown her into a panic, and she did confess to him what she had done." Mrs. Dorrance paused and added: "I do not pretend to say whether it was fear or honesty which impelled him, but it is my opinion that he persuaded her to return them at the earliest opportunity, and they decided on the dance last night as the most favorable time for placing the necklace where it would be found.

"That girl was crazy to marry him, though, and they had to have money, so, when I foolishly offered to let her have my jewels for the week-end, she saw her chance for a second coup. This time she would not fail, for the substitution might not be discovered for months, and much could happen in the meantime. So much for my emeralds, but to get back to the necklace. Neither of those two young conspirators had counted on the possibility of a private detective being installed at the club, but, as Hallowe'en drew near, I think they suspected the real identity and purpose of the new secretary—that would account for their increasing nervousness and fright—yet they had no other course but their original plan to follow.

"It is my belief that the girl concealed that necklace in the lantern. Doyle saw her do it and stationed himself there. Both she and her lover

knew that her guilt would be exposed. But, Mr. Crane, it is also my firm conviction that Gerald Landon came to the dance prepared for that very contingency and determined to go to any length to protect the girl who had stolen through love of him. I am not romantically inclined, but this is sheer logic. You will remember that he stood alone in the door of the conservatory. That window, where the lantern hung and Doyle stood, was within his unobstructed view and range. When he saw that Doyle knew and meant to remain on guard until he could recover the necklace and denounce Alice—well, it is my theory that Gerald Landon chose that moment of darkness to seal the detective's lips forever, even if he went to the chair for it! Have you a better theory, Mr. Crane?"

There was a horrified gasp from Philip, but Crane's face remained impassive as he replied: "None that I am prepared to offer, Mrs. Dorrance, but I must earnestly request that you will not repeat this theory of yours to any one else until after the inquest. You will have cause to amend it, I think, before then."

CHAPTER XVI

A PIECE OF RIBBON

WHEN Crane awakened in his room at the club on the following morning the church bells were tolling, and bright sunlight streamed in at the window. For a moment the haze of sleep still encompassed him, then consciousness returned in a full tide, bearing upon its crest the problem which confronted him.

Mrs. Dorrance's emeralds were a side issue and did not concern him, but, in spite of his repudiation of her theory as a whole, it had brought certain questions to his mind which must be answered, even while it had made clear to him several points upon which he had formerly been in the dark.

It might have been by sheer accident that Alice Dare had lingered under the dragon lantern early on the evening of the dance, yet her aunt's accusations, carried though they were through the medium of gossiping maids and an envious social

rival, were significant. He had Doyle's notes to confirm the report of the attachment which existed between the young girl and the penniless bank employee, but Doyle had also observed the increasing nervousness of the couple and their self-conscious avoidance of each other. He had stated his opinion that they were "up to some mischief." If they were guiltless of any wrong what had Alice Dare and Gerald Landon to fear? They were both young enough to wait, and, if the girl had any stamina, the mere disapproval of her aunt need not have caused her such agitation.

Mrs. de Forest had taken locker No. 19 in the ladies' dressing room for Alice's use, and the girl had been designated "N"—evidently niece—in Doyle's notes. For some reason he had kept a wary eye upon her from the first and had even included her in his list of possible "subjects" or suspects. At the same time he pronounced Landon straight and declared that there was "N. D." or nothing doing, in an attempt to connect him with the theft of the necklace. Had the dead operative considered only the girl's motive and opportunity, or had he other cause to suspect her?

Another phase of the enigma recurred to Crane's mind. Why had young Mrs. Sowerby stated that she was in the conservatory when the

shot was fired if, in reality, she had been upstairs in one of the resting rooms, which must have been passed by the person who threw the pistol out of the window?

Impatiently thrusting his futile cogitations from his mind, Crane sprang out of bed and rang the bell. Henry appeared, and a cold shower and hearty breakfast made the detective ready for his day's work. After ascertaining that Murdock was still at liberty about the club, but under the watchful eye of Jewett, he ordered the little flivver and started again along the road bordered by the glen, keeping his engine as silent as possible and sitting back under the screening top of the car.

It was just past eleven o'clock, and Crane anticipated that most of the country club colony would be at church. Even those members who did not usually put themselves to such unwonted exertion would want to catch any morsel of sensational gossip which might be let fall later. He deduced that others would count upon this fact, also, and would choose the glen, at this hour, as a safe meeting place. If he had hoped to come upon the same couple as before he was doomed to disappointment.

Leaving the car, he climbed the fence and strolled down the path beside the little stream, but

no sound of voices or footsteps rewarded him. He was about to turn back when he heard his name called in ringing, masculine tones and glanced across the brook to behold Gerald Landon and Alice Dare seated on a fallen log, a suspiciously decorous space between them.

"Won't you come over, Mr. Crane? There isn't any bridge, but you'll find a row of stepping-stones a few paces to your right."

"Thanks." Crane laughed. "Good morning, Miss Dare. May I join you? Most of the people I wanted to interview are at church, but I think you have found the best place of worship after all."

She nodded smilingly, but her flush deepened, as he sprang lightly across the tilting stones and seated himself upon a convenient stump.

"I—I have a headache, Mr. Crane. At least that is what I told my aunt, or I should have had to go to church, too!" she said with shy audacity. "You see I am putting myself in your hands so that you will not give me away, but it was such a beautiful morning I could not resist a walk, and then—then I met Mr. Landon."

"I won't give you away, Miss Dare, if you will allow me to ask you a question or two," he responded gravely. Then, as her eyes widened, and

she instinctively shrank away from him, he added: "Please don't be annoyed; I am sure that you will be only too glad to answer when you know what I wish to ask, even in the presence of Mr. Landon."

The challenge was unmistakable, and, mere girl though she was, she recognized it and lifted her little chin spiritedly. "You can ask me nothing concerning myself, Mr. Crane, that I am not perfectly willing to answer in the presence of Mr. Landon, or anybody else, but, if it is about that horrible murder, I have already told you what little I know, and I had rather not discuss it further."

"It isn't," he assured her. "Miss Dare, you attended a house party, somewhere in the Berkshires, about a week after the Harvest dance, didn't you?"

"Why, yes, at the Jordan Nicolls'," she replied, surprise raising her soft tones a note or two.

"They gave a masquerade, did they not? May I ask what sort of costume you wore?"

"A simple black domino. My aunt wished me to wear an Egyptian costume, but, at the last moment, I found that it was not suitable." The surprise was gone from the girl's tones now, and she hesitated as though embarrassed.

"Did you wear any jewels, Miss Dare?" Crane persisted.

To his astonishment she laughed suddenly, a lilting little ripple of sheer amusement.

"Oh, you mean those emeralds of Mrs. Dorrance's? Indeed, no! Of course I could not offend her by refusing her offer, especially as my aunt insisted that I accept, but I should have looked like a stained-glass window in them. I did not even take them with me!"

"Will you tell me, then, where you left them during your absence?"

Gerald Landon did not permit Alice to answer the detective.

"Look here, Mr. Crane, you'll have to pardon me for butting in, but I'd like to know what all this is leading to! That Dorrance woman didn't have her emeralds on at the dance Friday night; is she trying to claim that something happened to them while they were supposed to be in Alice's hands?"

"Gerald!" the girl exclaimed softly, but he retorted: "Oh, what is the use of pretending? I'm getting sick of it, dear, and, besides, after a certain conversation I had with Mr. Crane in the locker room at the club, yesterday, I know he doesn't ask a pointless question." He turned to

the detective. "Those emeralds are worth a fortune, and it would not have been safe for Alice to travel alone with them, even if she had intended to wear them. She consulted me, and I suggested that we ask Mr. Estridge to take charge of them; he thought it was a good joke and did so. That's all there is to it."

A vagrant puff of wind snatched at Miss Dare's tam-o'-shanter, and, as she raised both hands to her head to save it, her rough tweed sports coat fell open at the throat, exposing her slender neck and the silk blouse which she wore. Shivering a little, she drew the coat together before she took up her part of the explanation.

"You see, Mr. Crane, Mrs. Dorrance brought the emeralds to me in a traveling jewel case, just before I started for the Jordan Nicolls,' and I had to pretend to take them along, for my aunt never left me until I got into the motor to drive to the station. I made an excuse to stop at Mr. Estridge's lodge for a minute. He was waiting there for me by appointment, and Gerald, too, and we all looked at the jewels to make sure that they were all right. Then Mr. Estridge put them away in his own safe. When I returned from the Jordan Nicolls' on Monday I purposely took an earlier train than I was supposed to, and Mr.

Landon met me at the station with the Frasers' car and drove me to Mr. Estridge's." She paused and added in some confusion. "I—I suppose this all sounds very deceitful to you, but I don't think you quite understand the situation."

"Perhaps I understand it better than you think." Crane looked straight into her eyes, and they fell before his. "Please go on. Mr. Estridge was waiting for you and gave you the jewel case to slip into your traveling bag?"

She nodded.

"He insisted upon us both looking into it first, however, to make sure that the stones were just as we three had last seen them. He himself drove me first to Mrs. Dorrance's house to return the emeralds and then home, where he explained to my aunt that it was he who had picked me up at the station. He is a dear," she added impulsively. "You see, Mr. Crane, my aunt doesn't exactly approve of—of——"

"Me!" interjected Gerald. "I'm forbidden the house, and we have had to meet like this! I don't think there is anything particularly objectionable about me except that I haven't got scads of money, but that is enough to condemn me in the old lady's eyes. There was some fellow up at the Jordan Nicolls' whom Mrs. de Forest did approve of,

though, and that was why she was willing to have Alice accept Mrs. Dorrance's offer of the emeralds —wanted her to make a holy show of herself, rigged up like Cleopatra!"

"Gerald!" the girl exclaimed again softly. "It was kind of Mrs. Dorrance to offer them."

"Kind nothing!" retorted the young man. "Don't I know the bunch out here? She only did it to try to get in with those Nicolls people through your aunt!"

"What a he-gossip you are growing to be, Gerald!" Alice laughed, and then her face grew grave, as she asked: "But why did you ask about the emeralds, Mr. Crane?"

"I didn't, if you remember," he protested. "You brought them into the conversation, but I did mean to ask about them. I heard Mrs. Dorrance say that the settings of one or two of the pieces had become loosened, so it is as well, perhaps, that you did not wear them, but left them in the custody of Mr. Estridge during your absence. Now may I ask when either of you first became aware of the identity of Doyle?"

"I didn't until his death, as I told you yesterday," Gerald replied. "I liked him, but Alice said that there was something odd about him that

made her uncomfortable from the very day he arrived."

"Not quite that!" the girl denied nervously.

"Well, you said, only Thursday, that he asked you funny, unexpected questions and stared after you, and that you wished you could see his eyes without that shade or——"

"Gerald!" The cry broke involuntarily from the girl's lips. "I told you, too, that I did not dislike him—that his questions were never personal. Several other people thought there was something queer about him, also. You know I was only afraid that he might tell Mr. Sowerby how much we were together about the club, and Mr. Sowerby might ask you if we were secretly engaged. You would be just foolish enough to admit it, and then you would lose your position! He doesn't approve of his employees marrying under fifty, Mr. Crane!"

She had turned with a forced laugh to the detective, but he did not echo it. Instead he asked gravely: "But did you not know what his real object was in coming here? Were you not told?"

The girl's delicate face turned white to the lips, but she met his eyes fearlessly this time. "I was not, Mr. Crane. Why should I have been?"

"Because you knew what had occurred at the

Harvest dance," he replied slowly. "Do you recall a certain conversation between your aunt and yourself on reaching home that night? You were accused——"

"What?" Gerald was ready to explode, but neither of them heeded him.

"How could you know that?" Alice asked.

"How do I know that you were accused the other night, after Doyle was shot, of having put what had been stolen back where it was found? Servants gossip with their friends in other houses, and your aunt would do well to be sure that her maid is not within hearing."

"Stop right there!" Gerald had risen, and his face had whitened, too, beneath its coating of tan. "I'm going to get at the truth of this! What was Alice accused of stealing and putting back? She knew that fellow was a detective all the time and never told me! In Heaven's name, why not?"

"On my word of honor I never knew Doyle was a detective; I only suspected it the last few days, and then I thought that my aunt had hired him to spy upon us—to keep us from eloping!" Alice declared. "Don't look at me like that, Gerald! It was my aunt's diamond necklace that was stolen on the night of the Harvest dance, and, when we got home, she accused me of taking it! You know

how abusive she is and what I have had to endure! I could not tell you because, the next morning, after a conference with Mr. Estridge and some others of the house committee, she made me promise not to tell a soul that it had been stolen. When I suggested a private detective she turned on me and declared that she would rather lose a hundred necklaces—that she would rather die than put herself in the hands of such sharks! I'm sorry, but that is the word she used, Mr. Crane. I have always believed her implicitly, and I had no reason to doubt her word, particularly, when she told me, from time to time, that the necklace was being sought in some of the large cities. I only realized how cruelly deceitful she was when, after Doyle's death and the recovery of the necklace, she accused me of putting it there! I suppose I was the only person seen near that window, early in the evening, Gerald, but I was only waiting for you!"

"Do you mean the window where that dragon lantern hung—where poor Doyle stood just before he was shot?" Gerald demanded. "But that was where we had arranged to meet and slip into the conservatory, just as we did do! Could Doyle have found your aunt's necklace anywhere about there?"

"It was right inside that lantern all the time! It must have been there while I waited for you!" The tears were raining down the girl's pale cheeks. "Oh, Gerald, you believe in me, don't you? You see why Mr. Crane has followed us down here this morning—he thinks I took the necklace and then grew afraid and put it in that lantern to get rid of it, but I didn't! If only you believe in me nothing else matters!"

"If any one who accuses you of touching the abominable thing"—Gerald did not finish his threat, but knelt and gathered Alice into his arms. "I only wish I had known before that your aunt had accused you! You would never have spent another night under her roof, and you never shall again! My poor darling!"

"Oh, we can't—we mustn't tell just yet!" Alice exclaimed.

"Then, Mrs. Landon, may I respectfully suggest that when you wear your wedding ring around your neck you use a longer ribbon?" Crane had risen and stood smiling down at them. "You may not have noticed it, but I have not addressed you as 'Miss Dare' since the wind almost blew your hat off, a while ago, and your coat flew open as you raised your arms. Am I the first to be able to congratulate you both?"

The little bride smiled through her tears and shyly placed her hand in his extended one.

"You don't believe that I——" she began.

"I do not, Mrs. Landon, but, if you two try to keep your secret and go about the club looking as guilty as a pair of amateur crooks, I warn you that people are bound to talk more than they have already!" Crane declared.

"Let them!" Gerald exclaimed defiantly, as he, too, shook hands with the detective. "We were only married Thursday, but this dodging and sneaking has become unbearable already. We thought that we wouldn't announce it until I managed to get a job with a chance for advancement, but I won't allow Alice to enter her aunt's house again. I guess we can buck the game together, and, if you will keep our confidence until after the inquest, I will take my wife with me to town. In the meantime I'll tell Elsie Fraser, and she will put Alice up for the night."

"You can understand now why I was afraid of poor Doyle when I suspected he was a detective, Mr. Crane," Alice said. "Thinking that my aunt might have put him on our trail, in spite of her aversion to gentlemen of your profession, I feared that, if he discovered we were married, she would force me to let her have it annulled at once, on

the threat of—of accusing Gerald and me openly of the theft of her necklace. I wanted to keep our elopement a secret until the real thief was found."

"I understand, but are you sure no one else knows of your marriage?"

"I don't see how they could," she replied. "Gerald borrowed the Frasers' runabout, and we drove to a sleepy little village, only a few miles away, and found a minister. None of the Broadlawns crowd ever go there because there is nothing to see or do. You—you won't tell, Mr. Crane?"

He promised, congratulated them again, and took his leave. As he drove slowly back to the club the grim lines settled once more about his mouth. The romance which he had unearthed had been a very pretty one, but it had brought him no nearer to a solution of his problem, and the slayer of his colleague still walked the earth, unknown and unmolested.

In the rotunda of the club he came upon Philip Dorrance lounging over a sheaf of the Sunday papers which had just arrived from town. He was as immaculately turned out as usual, but his round face looked haggard and curiously wizen, and he started nervously as the detective was about to pass him with a mere nod.

"I want a word with you, Crane; been waiting an hour, in fact," he began. "Of course you know that I wouldn't have sent for you last night if my wife hadn't insisted, but you know also what women are! I wanted to warn you in a friendly way not to take any stock in that wild theory of hers. I am quite sure that there is some mistake about her emeralds, and I have persuaded her that it is best to keep the matter absolutely quiet and allow me to attend to it for her. If there is any fee for your time—your services in calling——" He paused suggestively, and Crane's eyes narrowed.

"There is no fee, Mr. Dorrance, for I have performed no service for you. But, if you are going to attend to the matter of the emeralds, yourself, I might give you a word of advice."

"Really?" Philip's brows went up superciliously. "Of what sort may I ask?"

"Go home to your wife and confess that you yourself sold her emeralds and substituted fakes; she may let you off to avoid the scandal," replied Crane. "Your only alternative is to be packed and ready to make your get-away when she starts for Harlier's to-morrow, but, if I am any judge of the lady, you won't get far!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHADOW ON THE DOOR

FOR a moment Philip was stricken speechless at the discovery of his guilt. Then he attempted to bluster, but Crane quickly cut him short.

"You did not anticipate that the fake stones might be imperfectly set. You trusted to luck that your wife would not discover the substitution for months to come, didn't you? What have you done with the money, Mr. Dorrance?"

"See here, Crane," the desperate young man said in a subdued tone, "this is none of your affair! You are not even an official detective! If I had done this thing, which you accuse me of, you would have no right to interfere without my wife's sanction, and you don't suppose she would give it, do you, and make herself the center of the biggest social scandal that Broadlawns ever had?"

"I do suppose just that—if I were to go and lay the whole story before her," retorted Crane.

"Were you to throw yourself upon her mercy and give her some stall about how you lost the money, and were she absolutely assured that not a whisper would ever be heard about it she might decide to forgive you. However I have not promised yet, and, if I were to speak an indiscreet word or two, here at the club, or drop one of the notes which I found after Doyle's death, proving your attempts to bribe him——"

"That is a lie!" declared Philip hotly, but his face paled, and he reeled slightly against the table.

"Careful, Mr. Dorrance!" the detective warned. "We are alone in this hall for the moment, but it will be a simple matter for me to summon such of the house committee as may be about the building or grounds. I can lay the notes before them, particularly the one in which it is proved that you offered Doyle a first mortgage on property which you do not own. It is presumable that you suggested carrying out the transaction through a dummy, as you wanted all the club funds upon which he could lay his hands before he was expected to disappear. If he had absconded he would have learned that it was impossible for him to collect interest, or foreclose on that mortgage in his own name. Perhaps you reasoned that he was too stupid to realize that?"

"Stop!" Philip's last vestige of bravado left him, and he whimpered like a stray cur. "It's no use, Crane; you've got me! I did make the substitution you suggest, and I've spent the money. You were right, too, about my wife. She would hound me to the ends of the earth if I tried to run away and an inkling of this got about. If you can find and silence that impostor, who telephoned yesterday and pretended to be from Harlier's, I will go to her and tell her the truth. Perhaps her pride will keep her from kicking me out—or worse."

"But I have not yet promised to remain silent." Crane reminded him significantly. "I might have my price even if Doyle did not, you know."

"So that's it! I might have known!" exclaimed Philip. "Well, whatever it is I'll pay if I can. There is no use in haggling—you have got me cornered. What do you want for your silence?"

"The true facts you threatened Mrs. Carter with if she didn't come across with the money for you to replace those emeralds," replied Crane sternly. "A part, but not all, of your effort at blackmail and extortion, in the glen yesterday morning, was overheard."

There was a pause, and then Philip shook his

head. "I can't do it!" he said. "She knows about the emeralds—I had to tell her, and the only hold I have over her to prevent her from repeating it is the fact that I could retaliate. She has bluffed me to a standstill, and now it is a question of silence for silence. What I threatened to tell has nothing to do with your case. It is just something I discovered by accident, soon after she came here, when I—I was rather gone on her. If that is your ultimatum, Crane, you must go ahead and ruin me, for she would if I spoke; it is a fifty-fifty break."

Crane knew the unalterable stubbornness of the weak when they are cornered. Gazing into the face of Philip Dorrance, he realized that it would be futile to argue further. With a shrug he dismissed the matter. "Very well. I will give you your chance, anyway. Go to your wife and make a clean breast of it and I will give you both my word to forget what I have learned. But she must not go about with any scandalous hints against Miss Dare in connection with my case and what led up to it. The young lady is absolutely innocent."

"I understand, Crane, and—and thank you," Philip answered brokenly. "I'd like to know how you got on to me, though."

The detective smiled. "With Doyle's notes and my partial knowledge of what took place between you and Mrs. Carter in the glen, together with a pretty well-grounded suspicion as to the object upon which you had lately lavished more money than you could afford, it wasn't difficult to guess," he replied. "Then, too, I watched you rather closely last night when your wife was telling me of her loss. If ever guilt was written upon a human countenance it was upon yours; your nervousness, your over-anxiety to assume charge of the investigation yourself, your attempts to prevent your wife from openly accusing another—all told against you, too. I will remain here for the next hour. If, during that time, Mrs. Dorrance will telephone to me here and assure me that she knows the truth, I pledge you my word to say nothing."

Leaving Philip grateful, but crushed with the prospect of the ordeal before him, Crane proceeded to the dining room, well pleased with the result of his long shot. He was halfway through his luncheon when a hand was laid upon the back of the empty chair opposite him and an urbane voice asked: "Lunching alone, Mr. Crane? Perhaps you won't mind my joining you?"

Crane glanced up to find Ogden Bowles con-

fronting him, smiling as though confident of his welcome. It seemed scarcely creditable that this calm, cold; well-poised man could be the same who, with the face of a fiend, had driven so madly along the highroad from the glen on the previous day.

"Delighted to have you, Mr. Bowles," he assented. A quick inspiration, borne of that memory, had come to him, and he added: "I haven't forgotten your very kind offer to give me any assistance in your power, and I may hold you to it."

"Up a tree?" the other asked banteringly, as he seated himself. "I have been in many a tight corner on the market. I have had to think quickly and guess right, or it would have been all up with me, and you are cordially welcome to my amateur help whenever you want it."

"Thanks! I appreciate the favor, but favors are dangerous things sometimes, don't you think?" the detective asked pointedly. "I do not mean any that you might do me, but I was thinking of the foolish, chivalrous things one sometimes does for a lady in distress."

Bowles glanced sharply at him, but Crane's face betrayed no hint of what lay behind his words. "I am not very chivalrous, I am afraid." This time Bowles' laugh was more obviously forced than before. "I don't think I would do anything

I considered foolish, even for the sake of a lady. I am past the age, Mr. Crane."

"We are most vulnerable when we feel that way," Crane replied in an impersonal, meditative tone. "Still it isn't always wise to make an enemy of one woman to protect another."

The broker laid down his knife and fork. "Just what are you driving at?" he demanded. "I haven't been protecting any woman at the expense of another if that is what you are hinting!" There was an underlying note of apprehension in his tones. The detective was quick to take advantage of it. "Oh, I was speaking in the abstract, I assure you," he replied casually. "I was thinking of a very interesting conversation I have just had with Mr. Dorrance. Some one played a rather stupid practical joke on his wife yesterday afternoon, but she has very keen ears and a good memory for voices, so they didn't get away with it as successfully as they had believed. It was done to get back at her husband for his attitude toward another woman—but this is in strict confidence, of course."

With the shrug of the born gambler, impassive in loss as in gain, Bowles sat back in his chair. "Now that you have told me so much, Mr. Crane —in confidence—hadn't you better finish?"

"Suppose you do that," suggested the other quietly. "It won't go any farther, you know, but I am rather curious about it, and, when I am curious about anything, I usually get to the bottom of it, privately or otherwise."

"You win!" Bowles said after a slight pause. "I think I do know something about what you are referring to, but that little cad had been forcing his attentions upon a certain lady beyond the limit of her endurance, and she had no other defense than to make use of some information she had gained about his wife. There wasn't much of a joke about it, Mr. Crane. Her knowledge was quite authentic—or so I understand she told the person to whom she appealed to act for her. She merely wanted to warn him through Mrs. Dorrance that she could create some scandal for them both if he did not cease to annoy her. I admit that it was a cattish, feminine sort of way of getting back, but there was nothing criminal about it, and I think it will prove effectual. Anyway her intermediary in the little passage at arms fell for it and will have to bear the result."

"I do not believe that there will be any, except that which the instigator of the little revenge had desired, Mr. Bowles," Crane reassured him. It was evident that the infatuated broker knew

nothing of Dorrance's threat nor the secret which it involved, but had permitted his jealousy to be worked upon to the end that he might be used. "I wouldn't do any more impersonating over the telephone, though, if I were you, even to please a lady; that sort of thing is apt to lead to trouble, but it won't in this case because you have come clean. It may relieve your mind to know that Mrs. Dorrance has no idea who her informant was, and she never will if the matter goes no farther from the other side. It was just a little quick thinking and a right guess on my part."

"Sold!" Bowles laughed a trifle shamefacedly. "I don't mind admitting that I acted on the impulse of the moment, and I have regretted it since. It was almost as caddish a thing as young Dorrance himself would be capable of doing. You can wager that no further move will be made by me or any one with whom I may have the slightest influence, and I appreciate your assurance that you will not disclose what you have learned. You turned the tables on me all right, Mr. Crane. To think that I was such a conceited idiot as to offer you my help!"

Before the detective could respond Henry tered and approached his chair. "Mrs. Dorrance is on the wire, sir. She says it is very urgent."

With a word of apology to his companion Crane rose and followed the steward to the booth in the locker room, and the deep tones of Mrs. Dorrance, choked with emotion, came to him as he lifted the receiver.

"Mr. Crane—I have called you up to tell you that, since our conference, I have learned that the theory I expounded to you is not tenable, and I —er—I deeply regret having made assertions which I could not prove. I shall hold you to your promise to keep my confidence, and I am highly grateful for it." Her voice broke in a throaty sob. "I have discovered that certain articles which I possessed were imitation, and I am going to replace them without taking any other action in the matter. I wish to avoid notoriety at all costs. The change was effected when the articles were taken into town over a month ago, presumably to be cleaned, but I imagine that you have already deduced that. I have decided, also—solely for the same reason of averting scandal—to keep another imitation which I thought was real when I purchased it. You will understand, I think."

"Quite, Mrs. Dorrance. Without impertinence may I venture to say that I am truly sorry that this situation should have arisen? Perhaps it

will all turn out better than you think, and please rest assured that I am honored by your confidence and shall not betray it."

Cutting short her embarrassed thanks, he returned to the dining room to find that his late companion had vanished, but a little folded note lay beside his own plate. He read:

Called away suddenly on important business. Wish you were my partner; with your faculties we could corner the market. I think you will admit that this luncheon is on me.

O. B.

Half an hour later the detective was rolling along the highway toward the Sowerbys' house over the hill. He was driving his own powerful car which he had brought out from town on the night of the murder. He passed Mrs. Carter's little cottage on the way and caught a fleeting glimpse of a soft blue gown and a figure clad in a brown suit, standing close together under the pergola, and he smiled to himself. The suit was identical in shade with that worn by Bowles at lunch, and the nature of the important business that had called him away was self-evident.

Rutherford Sowerby had motored to the station to meet some friends who were coming out from town, but Mrs. Sowerby received him on a sunlit

veranda. She was dressed in a delicate pink which brought out the rose tint of her cheeks, and she looked like the veriest girl, as she lay back among the flowered-chintz cushions of her hammock. Crane could scarcely believe her the same woman who had received him in the trailing violet draperies, amid the exotic atmosphere of dim lights and musk. Once more he gave her grudging admiration for the artistry with which she endeavored to create impressions, but, as before, the result was faulty. The flush upon her cheeks was a trifle too high to be natural, and the sun revealed faint lines of maturity which belied the girlishness of her manner.

"It is like summer, isn't it, Mr. Crane?" she asked gushingly, as she patted a chair beside her invitingly. "Fancy weather like this at such a time in the year!"

"Indian summer," he amended smilingly.

Mrs. Sowerby shuddered prettily in mock disgust. "Don't speak of it! I have lived in an atmosphere of Indian summer ever since I married! But what can I do for you, Mr. Crane? I hope you have not come even to mention that horrid affair of the other night. It seems ages ago, and I am doing my best to forget all about it."

"I am sorry to be obliged to recall it to you, then, Mrs. Sowerby." The detective's tone was very grave. "It would not have been necessary to do so, even momentarily, until the inquest, of course, if you had been quite frank with me yesterday."

"I?" Her blue eyes widened childishly, but the color ebbed from her cheeks beneath his gaze, leaving patches of pinkish purple which showed ghastly in the sunlight. "I told you all I knew, which wasn't anything, really."

"If you knew no more than you told me why did you say that you were in the conservatory when the shot was fired? I am sorry to contradict so charming a lady, but you were not there, Mrs. Sowerby. Where were you?"

She bit her lips, and her eyes narrowed, as she replied coldly: "You have been misinformed. I am not in the habit of being untruthful, Mr. Crane, and no one can prove that I was not there."

"I am afraid that they can and will if you force the issue," he insisted slowly. "What did you see or hear before or after that shot was fired, while you lay upstairs in one of the resting rooms? I am sorry to be so abrupt, but your husband will return at any moment, and, unless you are abso-

lutely candid with me, I must appeal to him to persuade you."

"How dare you!" Mrs. Sowerby sat up suddenly, but one trembling hand went to her throat. "I—I think this is positively insulting of you to attempt to coerce me! Who—who told you that they saw me up there?"

"I am not at liberty to say, but their evidence is incontrovertible. What did you see or hear that you were afraid to tell?"

Her shudder was very real this time, and for a moment she buried her face in her hands. When she looked up it was with the cowed, shifting glance of a trapped animal.

"A shadow!" she whispered. "I had turned out the light in the room in which I was lying, but the door was half open, and directly against it, only an instant after the sound of the shot, it seemed to me—before I could collect myself to rise—I saw the shadow of a hand—a hand holding a revolver! It disappeared, and then I heard the sound of the window at the end of the hall opening and steps retreating—I don't know whether toward the rear or down the front stairs. That is all, really all, Mr. Crane!"

"Then why did not you tell me this in the first place, Mrs. Sowerby?" he asked.

"Because—because I thought I knew who it was and—my own reputation was at stake." She spoke still in that almost toneless whisper. "I —I thought I recognized the shadow of that hand!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ROSE-LEAF EAR

"AND the admission that you saw that shadow of a hand would hurt your reputation, Mrs. Sowerby? You mean that, if you were called upon to aid in the identification of the person who had passed down that hall, your reputation would suffer?"

"If I were dragged into the case in any way, forced to admit that I thought I knew who it was —the person would turn on me and ruin me!" she declared fiercely. "You don't know what it is to have an elderly, jealous husband and live surrounded by a lot of gossiping cats! At the merest breath of scandal against me that reached his ears Mr. Sowerby would cast me aside like an old glove, and he has money and influence. I have neither, and I have endured too much, all these years, to be robbed now of what I have gained. A woman has got to fight for herself in this world!"

The veneer of childishness was gone from her now, and at last he saw the real woman without pose; shrewd, mercenary, with the greed of one who had known stark necessity and meant now to cling to her fleshpots at all costs, yet willing to play with fire provided she were not burnt, Maud Sowerby presented a mere distorted caricature of the self that her world knew.

"You saw only the hand? There was a cuff upon the wrist and a man's coat sleeve?" asked Crane.

"I—I do not know," she said in a lower, more guarded tone. "I did not see the wrist, just the hand with the pistol. It was like a close-up in the motion pictures, only awful because it was real!"

"But the mere shadow of a closed hand would be almost impossible to recognize, as would the sound of unseen footsteps, unless the person had some peculiarity in his or her walk," Crane expostulated. "You must have had some other reason for suspecting who had fired that shot, and I must remind you once more of the imminent arrival of your husband. You are fighting for yourself, Mrs. Sowerby, but I am fighting in the interests of justice, and I can afford to show no quarter. You will forgive me, but it is almost a mir-

acle that no breath of gossip has reached Mr. Sowerby's ears, for it has reached mine from many sources, and this is no time to mince matters. Whom did you think Mr. Dorrance had killed?"

She started up with a little gasp and then sank back again, her stubby hands clenching and unclenching in a storm of resentment and apprehension. Then the sound of a motor reached them from the road, and she collapsed. "Oh, don't tell him! I have done nothing wrong except just to —to flirt a little, but Dorry took it seriously, and I was frightened to death! If you will only wait I will tell you everything!"

But the motor, instead of turning in at the drive, passed along the road, and its sound diminished in the distance.

"Tell me now, Mrs. Sowerby." The detective's tone suggested more of command than request, and he added significantly: "There is still time, you see."

She hesitated, and then the words came in a little rush. "I was bored, and Dorry amused me; that was all there was to it on my side, but the conceited fool actually thought that I was going to run away with him! We—we had a quarrel in the conservatory on the evening of the dance, and

I told him that I had only been playing with him. Why, I didn't even care for him, and if I had I would not have given up my position to become a pariah for any man! He was furious and said that he had already burned both our bridges, and I told him that he couldn't burn mine, and, if he had got into some mess, as he had hinted, he would have to get out of it the best way he could, without trying to drag me in with him. He said he was desperate, but I remember that I replied I intended to protect myself no matter what happened to him.

"I was frightened, though, for I had never seen him quite so fiercely in earnest before, and I wondered what reckless, dreadful thing he had done. It spoiled my evening and gave me a headache, and that was why I went upstairs to lie down for a while. When I heard that shot I was sure for a moment that he had killed himself, and I was stiff with the horror of it! Then, when I saw the shadow of that hand, I thought that, perhaps, he had—had killed my husband in some quarrel over me, and I covered my eyes. That is why I saw only the hand holding the pistol, but I heard the opening of the window and the footsteps dying away down the hall, just as I have told you. Of course I am not accusing him, but he had hinted so

violently, during that quarrel, of trouble coming to both of us that I did not doubt it was he. For a minute I couldn't have moved nor screamed if I had wanted to! Then some one shouted for lights from below, and I realized that I would be missed. I jumped up and ran downstairs, passing Mrs. Carter who was seated at the foot, and joined the others crowding out to the veranda. But I never reached there. I heard some one shrieking, and everything seemed to spin about and disappear in darkness around me. The next thing I knew I was lying on a bench which had been brought from the conservatory, and Mrs. Fraser was taking care of me. I haven't seen Dorry since, and I never will again if I can avoid it. I hate the very thought of him now when I think how foolish I have been—how nearly I allowed a silly flirtation to wreck my life!"

"But, when you discovered that it was the supposed club secretary who had been killed, why did you still think that Mr. Dorrance was guilty?" Crane asked. "Why do you think so now, Mrs. Sowerby?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think!" She struck one of the cushions with her clenched fist. "I knew that Dorry had spent more money in the last month than he could ever have wheedled out of

that wife of his, and I suppose the idea came to me that there had been something—well, funny, about the club accounts in some way. I knew, too, that, if he were ever suspected and forced to give an accounting, he would tell about the attentions he has showered on me and work the old Adam stunt: 'The woman tempted me!' Now you know everything, but I never will admit that I told it to you! I never will admit that I was anywhere but in the conservatory, alone, when that shot was fired."

"Are you quite sure that you saw that shadow of a hand, or that you heard those footsteps at all, Mrs. Sowerby?" Crane caught her shifting gaze. "Are you quite sure that there was any one upstairs but yourself?"

"Do you mean that I dreamed it? You don't suppose I would be stupid enough to mention it if I had, do you?"

"Oh, no. I think it must have been real enough, for the window was open, and the pistol was found outside where it had been thrown. But it was a woman's pistol, a little toylike thing, and the bullet taken from Doyle's breast fits it!"

Mrs. Sowerby rose, and her eyes above the garish patches of rouge were dilated with horror. "'A woman's pistol!'" she repeated in low, grating tones. "And you ask if I were not alone up-

stairs! Do you mean to insinuate that I killed him? Why, I scarcely knew that the man existed! Why should I want to—to murder our club secretary? Are there no limits to what people in your profession are permitted to say or do in your efforts to find a victim and make out a case?"

"But are you sure that you considered him merely the new clubhouse secretary? You were embarrassed and confused in his presence from the very day of his arrival. Did you not suspect him of being other than he appeared? You were afraid of him, you avoided him as much as possible. Did you not fear that some gossip might have reached your husband's ears, or those of Mrs. Dorrance? It is your creed that women must fight for themselves in this world. Some do it with blandishments, and some with bullets."

"Great heavens, not I!" She shrank away from him as he, too, rose. "I did think, somehow, that the man was watching me; his eyes seemed to follow me all the time, particularly when Dorry and I were together, and I admit that I wondered once or twice if he might not be one of those shabby sneaks who spy out divorce evidence, but my conscience was clear. I had done no wrong, and if Mrs. Dorrance couldn't keep her husband to heel that was her own affair! I never thought

seriously that it was my husband who had employed such a creature, for Mr. Sowerby is too big a man for that sort of thing. I never had a pistol or revolver in my hand in my life. I wouldn't even know how one worked. Who could have dared to hint at such a thing of me?"

The detective was saved the necessity of a reply by the second whirring of a motor, but this one did not pass. It turned in at the driveway, and, as it approached the house, Mrs. Sowerby's manner changed as though by magic. Her brow cleared, her eyes reassumed their former child-like stare, and she actually forced a dimple in either cheek as she held out her hand to the detective. "I must entertain my husband's guests, Mr. Crane. But, perhaps, you would care to stay and meet them?"

He accepted his dismissal and was about to act upon it, but he was too late. Sowerby rounded the corner of the house and insisted upon presenting his friends, a rotund financier, named Barnaby, and a young, but rising, mining engineer and geologist, Charles Wharton.

"Here's the very chap I was telling you about," Sowerby announced. "Sorry I wasn't home when you arrived, Crane, but I suppose my wife has been chattering to you, eh? Now that you

are here you must come in with us, if only for a few minutes. Maud will insist upon serving that infernal tea of hers, but there's still some of my private stock left, unless the butler has beaten me to it!"

Crane tried to escape, but, finding it impossible to do so, yielded with a good grace. Mrs. Sowerby appeared for a moment to greet her husband's friends, told the detective sweetly how glad she was that he had reconsidered his decision not to wait for their arrival, and then, at a growled hint from Rutherford Sowerby, she retired, while the four men repaired to the smoking room. Crane did not drink with the others, but he lighted a cigar and sat back studying the visitors.

Barnaby he put down as the average type of hard-headed business man who had made his pile, but the young engineer interested him. He was rugged and deeply tanned, with keen, humorous eyes and a frank, engaging manner. He had lately come North from the Texas oil fields, it appeared; he knew Ralph Fraser and was curious to hear all about the tragedy at the club.

When it had been thoroughly discussed the talk turned on celebrated murder cases in general. The financier had once been a star witness at the trial of a bank robber who had shot the

watchman. After the financier's story Crane turned to the other guest: "Have you ever been present at a murder trial, Mr. Wharton?"

The engineer shook his head, smiling with a flash of white teeth in his sunburned face. "No, Mr. Crane. Nearest I ever came to it was the Walker affair in Dallas three or four years ago, but the woman was never brought to trial for lack of sufficient evidence."

" 'The Walker affair!' " Crane repeated.

"Don't you remember?" Wharton asked. "Guess it didn't make much of a stir up here, but it started out to be about the most sensational case of its kind that Dallas ever had, and then it ended in a fizzle. Young, pretty wife, rich, unattractive husband, good-for-nothing handsome admirer—the old triangle, with a raven-haired, modern Lucretia Borgia as its apex, supposed to have administered slow poison to friend husband. Anyway he died, and people began to talk. When it was found out that he had left his wife only the third of his fortune, which the law demanded, the admirer vanished, and the young widow could not wholly conceal her chagrin. Finally she was arrested, but later she was released, and no one has heard of her since."

"I remember reading about that, I think,"

Barnaby remarked. "Did you say she was pretty? Didn't she have an odd sort of a deformity which gained her a nickname in the press?"

Wharton nodded. "'The girl with the rose-leaf ear,'" he quoted. "One ear was normal, but the other was undeveloped and crumpled, not unlike the leaf of a rose. The papers, when they could get a snapshot of her with that ear showing, played it up big. But she usually pulled down a curl or two over it to hide it, although it wasn't repulsive at all. Rather attractive than otherwise, I thought. I've often seen her, but I never met her."

"Where do all these people who are acquitted of notorious crimes, or released through lack of evidence, go to?" demanded Sowerby. "Not one in a hundred lives it down; they disappear as though they had vanished from the face of the earth, and yet they must be dragging out existences somewhere."

The financier laughed. "Remember Etta Wales, the girl who was acquitted of that murder in a taxi in Philadelphia some little time ago?" he asked. "She isn't exactly dragging out existence; she's one of the leading spirits in church and social circles in quite a big town in upper New

York State, married to the richest man in the community, and a charming, if somewhat austere, hostess. I know for I have dined at her house more than once, and I don't think that any one has ever had a suspicion of her identity up there. You can't always tell!"

"Indeed you cannot," Crane agreed, as he rose. "Gentlemen, I'm delighted to have met you and had this little talk, but I'm out here for work, you know, and I must be getting on. Mr. Sowerby, I'll see you at the inquest to-morrow."

His host followed him out into the hall. "Was there anything that you wanted to see me about particularly?" he asked. "Glad to be of any help that I can."

"Then have you a private phone in a booth or closet somewhere?" Crane asked. "There is a message that I have got to get through to town and which I forgot all about at the club. I wouldn't impose on you, but my chief is waiting on the other end of the line for it."

"Certainly! Right this way in that closet under the stairs! It is a direct wire with no other extensions in the house, so you won't be disturbed nor listened in on."

"Nobody would hear anything very sensational!" Crane replied as he stepped into the

closet. "It is just a report on some notes which poor Doyle left behind him in his office."

The smile faded from his lips, however, when he had closed the door upon his host, and his voice tensed with suppressed excitement when he gave the number of the agency in the city. It seemed an age before he managed to get O'Hare himself on the wire.

"That you, chief? Crane speaking. I want a man out here on the first train with all the clippings we've got relative to the Walker murder case in Dallas, three or four years ago. . . . Yes, I know it never went to trial. . . . Say, wasn't one of our boys down there about that time? . . . Who, Lovell? Can you get hold of him? . . . Good! Send him down with the clippings and tell him to make it snappy!"

He rang off before O'Hare could get in any remarks of his own, and, stepping out of the closet, he found Sowerby waiting for him by the front door. The latter would have detained him hospitably once more, but Crane excused himself firmly and took his leave. The gravel swirled from under the wheels of his car, as he tore down the driveway and careened out upon the highroad leading to the club, and his racing thoughts kept pace with it.

Mrs. Carter! Why had he not considered her as a dominant figure in the case before? He had sent a man down to Charlotte to look her up, it is true, but merely to see that the story, which she had told of her early life, was correct, as a matter of routine. But had he? He recalled now that it had struck him as odd from the first that a woman of her evident good taste and artistic sense should have worn her hair in a fashion which was so obviously unbecoming, and he had concluded that it must be to conceal some deformity. That was the reason, when he had sent Walsh to town with that message to the chief for a man to go to Charlotte, he had mentioned the ears as a means of identifying the erstwhile Nina Shirley, and he spoke of black hair instead of red because on his visit to her, while they stood together in her sunlit garden, a beam of light darting through the trees had rested for a moment on her head, and he saw that the silky strands of auburn were distinctly dark at the roots.

Could it be that the secret which Philip Dorrance had discovered concerning her had been that of the "rose-leaf" ear, and had he remembered the accounts of the case and held her identity over her head in his attempt to blackmail her?

"You speak of mercy!" Her words came back

to him in a swift rush: "Women have shown me scant mercy in my life." And again: "The world is wide, and Broadlawns is only a tiny corner of it!"

Was she one of the driven ones of the earth, of whom Sowerby had spoken, who, acquitted or freed by the law, were yet eternally branded and cast out by society, living in seclusion and fancied security, only to be forced to move on when their identity became known?

On reaching the club, he went directly to his room and paced back and forth for an hour or more, piecing together fact and theory. Doyle had been in Texas three or four years before, and Mrs. Carter had told Crane herself that Doyle seemed to think he had seen her somewhere. Could it be that in the expression of this thought he had signed his own death warrant? She had had grim experiences with detectives if she were, indeed, the "Mrs. Walker" of that former case. Had she recognized the type, perhaps even recognized the man himself through his disguise and fancied him upon her trail?

A new life was opening before her. She had a certain position and the prospect of a marriage which, at least, meant congeniality and added prosperity. Was she the type of woman to permit

all that to be swept away from her when, by one daring act, she might avert exposure? Once married to Bowles he could not discard her even if he discovered that unfortunate episode, provided she had legally changed her name to that which she now bore, for the law had freed her.

The afternoon shadows lengthened, and twilight came while Crane mentally anathematized the infrequency of Sunday trains and impatiently awaited the arrival of Lovell with the press clippings. Wharton, the engineer, had said that the papers had played up any snapshots they could obtain of the suspected woman with the crumpled ear exposed. Surely among the clippings there would be one or more such reproductions, and dyed hair and a lapse of a few years could not bring unrecognizable changes. A glance at the pictures would tell him whether he was off upon another wild-goose chase, or had at last hit upon the truth.

With dusk there came a knock upon his door, and he sprang eagerly to open it. Samuel Estridge stood upon the threshold.

"Heavens, man, what are you doing without a light?" the attorney asked. "I trust I am not intruding on any very serious train of thought, but you promised to look in on me at my lodge to-day, and I waited as long as I could. Since the moun-

tain did not come to Mahomet, behold Mahomet has come to the mountain, bag and baggage—or as much as I could crowd into my car! I am a neighbor of yours now, Crane."

The detective had switched on the light, and now he gestured hospitably to a chair. "Come in, do, Mr. Estridge. Delighted to have you," he said. "I'm sorry about not calling on you, but, to be perfectly honest, I came by accident upon a point which may loom up big in this case, and it temporarily drove everything else from my mind. But what is this about being a neighbor of mine? Do you mean that you have left your lodge and moved to the club?"

Estridge nodded. "It is not my lodge any longer, but has become honeymoon villa," he announced. "I have turned it over, together with my scandalized cook and manservant, to those two infants, Gerald Landon and Alice, for a month. Then they will move to town, and Gerald will enter my office; shouldn't wonder if he did mighty well in time, with the proper backing, and I am going to see that he gets that. Sowerby will be like a bear with a sore head, I am afraid, and I cannot think of a simile that would be fitting for old lady de Forest's state of mind, but I can't help that. Those children are going to have a chance

for a little happiness before they start to 'buck the game' together as Gerald expresses it. He told me how you discovered their romance."

"How did you?" Crane laughed.

"I didn't. Gerald came to me for advice this afternoon, and I made him return to the Frasers', where he had left her temporarily, and bring Alice straight to the lodge; I was de trop, and that is the reason why I could wait there no longer for you. But what about this new point in your case? Do you feel inclined to discuss it? I heard that you lunched here with Bowles to-day; he's not connected with it, is he?"

Before the detective could reply there came a second knock upon the door, and this time it was Lovell himself, armed with a huge brief case. Estridge rose, but Crane stopped him.

"Don't go just yet, Mr. Estridge. This is Lovell, one of our operatives from the head office in town and a pal of poor Jim Doyle. Did you bring the clippings?"

"Right here." The operative opened his brief case upon the bed, and a mass of newspaper cuttings fell out. "Nothing new turned up here about that Walker business, has there? These are from the principal Dallas papers."

"Dallas?" the attorney asked, as Crane bent

eagerly over the clippings. "Do you mean the case of the Walker woman who was arrested on suspicion of having poisoned her husband?"

"Yes, sir," Lovell responded. "Doyle and I were in Dallas at the time, and we saw her at the inquest. She was let off later for lack of evidence, but the case is still open, and it is a rule of our office to collect and keep all clippings in big criminal cases until they are definitely closed, one way or another."

"Mr. Estridge"—Crane had straightened and held a double-column strip of newspaper to the light for a minute of close scrutiny—"you were asking me just now about the new point which I thought I had discovered. If you will look at the face pictured here I think you will find your answer."

CHAPTER XIX

"THE TRIANGLE TURN"

LAMPLIGHT was gleaming softly through amber-tinted curtains on the lower floor of Mrs. Carter's pretty cottage. A high-powered car drew up at a discreet distance down the road, and three men alighted.

"Better come up to the house with us, sheriff; you can wait with Lovell on the porch," Crane suggested, as he switched off the lights.

"You didn't think I was going to sit back here and snooze with the warrant in my pocket, did you?" the sheriff asked, easing his stout body through the door of the tonneau. "Don't you forget to fix it so that the front door is left open behind you, after her maid lets you in."

They proceeded up the driveway, and when they were close to the house Crane halted. A low-geared, long-hooded runabout, whose lines he recalled, stood in the side road.

"Bowles must have stayed to dinner. He wasn't

at the club, and that looks like his car parked there."

"It is," Sheriff Coburn replied grimly. "I've taken him up enough times for speeding, to know it, all right!"

"That is awkward, but we ought to have anticipated it," the detective remarked, adding: "Which is the drawing-room, sheriff?"

"The row of windows to the left of the front door."

"Then come on. I'll manage to disarrange the curtains at one of those windows so that you can look in. When I give you the high sign you will know what to do."

They ascended the steps of the little porch as lightly as possible, and Crane rang the bell while the other two crouched in the shadows. Presently a trim maid appeared and, after a murmured word or two, admitted him, closing the door tight, but almost immediately it opened again, and a knife-like ray of light streamed forth.

"He's fixed the door, all right!" said the sheriff with satisfaction. "Now watch the windows and see if any of the curtains move."

To the waiting Lovell it seemed hours before the draperies at one of the windows in the center of the row were swept aside as though by a care-

less hand, and, although they fell back into place, there remained a narrow aperture through which they could obtain a view of the whole room.

Ogden Bowles was seated a little apart, as though taking no share in the conversation, but he was watching every move through narrowed lids. In the center of the room Mrs. Carter leaned back among the cushions on a low couch, and Crane occupied a chair facing her.

"Look!" The sheriff nudged his companion. "The light of that lamp is shining full on her now, and you can see her plain. Is it the same woman?"

"I couldn't swear to it from here," Lovell responded after an interval. "Red hair does make a difference, and remember I only saw her a couple of times, years ago. Oh, what is Crane doing?"

A tall vase of autumn flowers rested upon a stand beside the couch upon which Mrs. Carter was seated. With an awkward gesture the detective overturned it. Bowles sprang to catch it, but he collided with Crane, and the latter, in putting out his hand to save himself, touched Mrs. Carter's hair. She shrank back, but not before he had swept aside the smooth coil which was banded down tightly over her left ear, exposing for an instant the tiny, crumpled lobe of pink flesh. At

the same moment he motioned almost imperceptibly toward the windows.

"Come on! That's our signal," the sheriff exclaimed beneath his breath.

"And that's the woman, too!" added Lovell. "Easy now! Don't open the door any wider than you can help."

They slipped through the front door and down the hall to the drawing-room. They stationed themselves beside the threshold, just outside the range of vision of those within.

"It doesn't matter in the least about the vase," Mrs. Carter was saying. "But my hair! You must pardon me for a moment while I go and rearrange it, and I will send Letty to mop up the water which was spilled."

"Don't bother about your hair, Mrs. Carter. It is too late now." Crane spoke with deliberate significance.

" 'Too late?' " she asked.

"Yes. You did not wear it like that down in Dallas four years ago, did you? But your name was not 'Carter' then either."

"What do you mean?" she demanded sharply. "Who is this mysterious woman I am accused of being? Ogden, I don't understand it! First Doyle and now Mr. Crane——"

"And Doyle was shot," Crane interrupted her. "This is the woman I know you to be! I have just proved it by creating a little diversion so that I might lift the hair with which your left ear is covered."

There was a rustle of paper, a little cry, and then the sound of a man's half-suppressed oath.

"Don't believe him, Ogden! Don't look at that picture! It is not I!" Her voice rose in an agonized wail. "The man must be mad!"

"Lovell!" called Crane. "Sheriff Coburn!"

The operative entered with the sheriff at his heels, and the woman confronted them, both hands nervously clutching her blouse.

"Do you know this lady?" Crane demanded of the operative. "Have you ever seen her before?"

"Yes, sir. I saw her in Dallas four years ago. She was under arrest for murdering her husband by poison. Her hair was black then, but it is Mrs. Walker," Lovell responded promptly. "I'd swear to it anywhere. Look out! Stop her, somebody!"

With one last, despairing glance at Bowles' stricken, but implacable, face the woman had darted around the table, crashing the chairs behind her to impede the progress of the three men who sought to seize her. Then she disappeared

out of a small side door, slamming it after her.

"It works with a spring lock," Crane exclaimed, as he tried vainly to wrench it open. "Help me to break it down, Lovell!"

It required the united efforts of all three, however, to batter the stout little door down. Bowles stood where he had been when she made her hurried flight, and he was staring with dazed eyes at the pictured face in the newspaper clipping which he held in his hands.

Just as the sheriff and the two detectives got the door down at last and dashed out upon the veranda they heard the humming of a powerful motor, and the low-geared runabout shot past them and down the drive, gathering momentum as it fled like a live thing.

"Quick! She's taken Bowles' car. If she is anything like as good a driver as he we will have a race for it!" Crane exclaimed as they rushed across the lawn and burst through the hedge to where their own car waited.

"At the rate she was going when she turned into the road, if she isn't a good driver, it means death," Lovell declared. "Come on, sheriff."

They piled into the car, and Crane settled himself down grimly behind the wheel. Far in advance of them, before he started his own motor,

the detective could hear the diminishing roar of the car ahead, and he knew that it meant indeed a race.

"She ain't aiming to go through the village at that rate, is she?" Sheriff Coburn asked, as they rolled down the road with ever-increasing speed. "No, she's turning off at the Corners and heading, I guess, for the station at Watkins, to catch the midnight express. A woman in a blue dress, without any hat nor coat, couldn't get far! Great Scott! I never went so fast I couldn't breathe, before!"

Then he lapsed into silence. When they took the turning at the Corners with a swirling skid of the heavy back wheels an unconscious groan of dismay escaped him.

The road before them was straight and fairly level, and they were gaining on the car ahead. The moon, which had emerged from the cloudlike haze of earlier evening, showed them the flutter of a blue gown, as the runabout rocked from side to side of the road and seemed scarcely to touch the ground.

All at once the sheriff gave a sudden cry of horror. "Catch her before she gets to the next turn of the road, or she'll be killed, sure!" he said, bending forward to call into Crane's ear. "It's

the Triangle Turn, the sharpest in all the country round!"

"Doing my best!" called back the detective. "Hold fast! I'm going to let her out!"

Inch by inch and yard by yard they crept up to the car ahead, but, just when they seemed about to overtake it, it would give a sudden spurt and leap forward, scudding like a cloud before a gale. Once they caught a glimpse of the white patch which was her face as she glanced over her shoulder to see how close her pursuers were, but her car gave a hideous lurch and careened almost across the road, and she did not look back again.

"There's the Triangle just ahead!" shouted the sheriff. "Good heavens, can't we stop her! If you don't—but you'll have to slow up, or we'll be done for ourselves!"

If Crane heard he gave no answer. He was watching that flutter of blue whipping the wind from the pursued car, gauging its speed and its chances of rounding that turn so menacingly near. He knew that he could not overtake her now until that point in the road was reached, and he slowed down.

The runabout shot forward as though sped from a cannon's mouth, and suddenly its lone occupant seemed to be aware of her own danger.

A half-smothered cry was borne back to them, and then gamely the runabout swerved to essay the turn.

"Can she make it?" Lovell asked. "No! She's over!"

There had come a sudden sharp crack from the runabout, and it reeled madly to the side of the road, overturning in the ditch with a sickening crash. The detective halted his own car by a straightaway dive through a fence and into a meadow of low, marshy ground. Here he circled and slowed down, coming to a stop by the broken fence. The three men with electric torches leaped from it and crossed the road to where the wreck of the runabout lay, one white arm and hand streaked with crimson, protruding from beneath it. She did not move nor seem to breathe when they lifted the car from her and dragged her out. Lovell procured some water from a near-by brook and dashed it over her face, and then her eyelids fluttered and parted, and a faint moan escaped her.

She gazed bewilderedly up at the three for a moment and then consciousness returned, and she spoke faintly: "This is . . . better so. I am Nell Walker. I suspected that Doyle was a detective . . . that new proof had been found against me down in Dallas. As soon as I was sure I shot

him. I stood near the foot of the staircase and fired, then I ran back and threw my pistol . . . out of—the hall window. When the lights went up I was sitting on the stairs where I had been standing. No one—knew I had even moved."

"Don't you try to talk now, ma'am," the sheriff implored her soothingly. "Are you in any pain?"

"No. That's the odd part of it, and my brain is clear, but I can't move a muscle. It must be my spine that is broken. My dear Mr. Coburn, if you and Mr. Crane want the truth from my lips you will have to let me talk now and talk quickly. I think you understand. I did kill my husband in Dallas . . . in the manner and for the motive . . . that the coroner tried to establish. I had known the real Nina Shirley . . . in Charlotte years ago . . . we had been at school together, and we always corresponded until my trouble. I kept track of her, though, and when she died, just before I came here, I took her name and became her."

Her eyes were fixed on Crane, who had been writing rapidly on a leaf torn from his notebook, and now, as he looked up expectantly, she smiled. "My confession? I've heard of such things. But I think that is all. Those lights you are carrying . . . gone out, haven't they? . . . And

what is the matter . . . with the moon? . . . Everything is growing dark."

The three men glanced from their gleaming electric torches to the brilliant moonlight and then at each other and understood. The sheriff felt vaguely about his head to remove the cap which had blown off at the first turning, while Crane slipped a pen between the woman's nerveless, stained fingers and guided them as they made a wavering cross below what he had written.

Her head seemed to settle into the coat which Lovell had folded beneath it, and her eyelids drooped. They thought her already gone when she spoke again.

"My husband . . . no defense, but with Doyle . . . if I hadn't been absolutely sure . . . would never have . . . pulled trigger."

She sighed gently and was still. For a long moment no one spoke or moved and then Crane drew a handkerchief from his pocket and laid it softly over the face upturned in the moonlight.

. . . . . .

"And the necklace?" Samuel Estridge queried. "Odd that the mystery of its theft and reappearance in the dragon lantern was never cleared up, isn't it? That bauble of Mrs. de Forest's was the indirect cause of it all; the death of poor Jim

Doyle and the unmasking of Mrs. Carter. I cannot believe it was Murdock, for he has run absolutely straight in the new position I found for him."

It was a balmy May night in the following spring and he and his week-end guest, O'Hare's star detective, were smoking together on the terrace before his lodge.

Renwick Crane smiled into the darkness.

"That little affair was solved the day after the inquest but as Mrs. de Forest had regained her property intact and the charge she could have brought in any event was merely a minor one she decided to avoid the notoriety of a prosecution," he remarked.

"Really!" Estridge leaned forward in his chair. "You cannot mean that it was Alice, after all! She has forgiven the elopement and made much of the young couple, particularly since Landon came into all that money!"

"No, it wasn't her niece, nor was there any actual robbery," replied the detective. "I have given you my confidence before this, Mr. Estridge, and I see no reason for withholding it now, especially as the—er—borrower of the necklace is no longer a member of your country club."

"Ogden Bowles!" the lawyer ejaculated.

"Exactly." Crane nodded. "I had his financial record looked up and the report down to the most minute detail of his transactions during September and October reached me the day after the inquest. He was a born gambler, you know, a plunger, who took probably the longest chances of any operator on the Street and in September just before the Harvest Dance he was virtually on the rocks, at the ultimate limit of his resources. Three days later he covered his holdings with a large sum of money—considerably over a hundred thousand dollars,—and saved himself. From then until Hallowe'en he was on the right side of the market, completely recouped his losses and made a phenomenal profit besides. Where did that money come from? What collateral security had he been able to produce to obtain it? Harlier had valued Mrs. de Forest's necklace at something over two hundred thousand, and I simply put two and two together and accused him point-blank.

"He had been hard hit by the disclosure concerning Mrs. Carter's identity and her tragic death had completely unnerved him, so that at my attack he broke down and told me the truth without reservation. On the night of the Harvest Dance, as he was stepping into his car, he saw something shining in the driveway at his feet and, picking it

up, discovered that it was the famous necklace. Mrs. de Forest had been out on the veranda during the evening and it must have slipped from her neck and fallen over the rail, for if you remember the clasp was defective."

Estridge nodded without speaking and the detective went on:

"Bowles' first impulse was to return it, and then he remembered his desperate need, and the gambling instinct arose within him. If he could put the necklace up as security, recoup his losses and regain it again he could place it where it would be easily found and no one would be the wiser. He took the chance and won, as we know, and on the night of Hallowe'en he came early, just after the lights had been strung on the veranda, and coiled the necklace into the dragon lantern. Then he left and returned with Mrs. Carter."

"Could Doyle have seen him putting the necklace into the lantern?" asked Estridge. "It must have been already lighted."

"It was, but from some notes which Jim Doyle left behind him I think he became suspicious about some one else who later from an entirely different motive hovered about that window. Doyle, then, in all probability, investigated, discovered the necklace and stood guard beneath it to catch the

thief red-handed, when the shot came which ended everything for him."

"Poor chap!" There was a little silence and then the lawyer added: "We all supposed that Bowles resigned from the club and went to live abroad after selling his seat on the Stock Exchange because of his tragic memories of Mrs. Carter."

"I think that was a contributary reason, but he promised me that if he were not prosecuted he would leave the country and never return. He could not in any event have continued to play the Wall Street game for his nerve was gone; the knowledge that the woman he loved was a double murderess had broken him, heart and spirit."

"And what a ghastly mistake that second murder was!" Estridge threw his cigar end out over the terrace and watched the glowing arc of its descending spark until it vanished in the dewy grass of the lawn. "Your unfortunate colleague never even suspected Mrs. Carter's identity."

"No. Her hidden guilt made her self-conscious." Crane paused and added: "It was from no logical conviction, but the goad of her own conscience alone which pulled that trigger."

THE END

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